

Source Material

Craig A. Eddy



Book 2 of
Except for Thee and Me

Source Material

by
Craig A. Eddy

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is

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Chapter 1

A New Beginning

(Monday morning)

"Morning, Mata! Morning everyone," Muriel sang out as she translated into her office. "So, what's happening this bright, beautiful day?"

Mata just looked out the window at the rain, and shook her head. The only reason it wasn't coming down in buckets was because nature hadn't figured out a way to produce the buckets. Muriel's attitudes certainly had very little to do with the weather. For the second day, the only sunshine had been INSIDE Muriel's office, and that thanks to the work of Carla in creating this miniature world based loosely on children's stories, that had it's own day/night sequence for lighting.

"You might want to look at Sally's on-line magazine," Mata said. "It took her a little longer than she thought, but I think she managed to counter that other article – the one we're still trying to track down."

Muriel quickly went to her desk and brought up Sally's website. And there, after a short, introductory paragraph, was a day-by-day list of things that Muriel had been involved with from the time that she had 'formalized' the consort-ship with Taylor. It included the request to Carla to build 'The Welcoming One', and her first viewing of the startling building and subsequent creation of the sculpture for behind the desk.

The tone of the article was simply old friends getting together again and catching up on what had been happening in their lives, and included some background in the friendship between Muriel and Sally. It did touch, briefly, on Taylor and promised more in a subsequent article. It never once mentioned the other magazine or it's article, yet managed to completely obliterate the idea that Muriel was a captive of anyone. And Muriel grinned at how well her friend had managed to weave it all together and make her look like the 'good guy'.

"Oh, this is great!" Muriel said, then began reading the 'Comments' section following the article. "Hmm. Interesting. There's a couple of comments in here that claim that the article is a fraud. That nothing like what the article said actually happened."

"I know. We back-traced those. Unfortunately, they do much the same thing that the article did – end up in dead-ends in one way or another. Sally's image of the person that dropped off that article to her magazine has come up blank, too," Mata said. "This is frustrating. NOBODY is this 'invisible'."

"Got a question for you," Muriel said. "When Melanie finally closed down CIA the last time, was she able to bring in all the 'Operations' people?" Mata looked at her, startled. "What I'm wondering is if it's someone that blames me for the loss of his or her job."

"GOOD question," Mata replied. "I don't have a good answer. But I can find out. Give

me a bit, and I'll see what I can do. It may not be just 'Operations', either. There were cross-overs from the 'Intelligence' side, too. What brought that up?"

"Just that other countries kept their 'Operations' people in the field," Muriel said. "America closed it down, and Melanie started using Envoys or trained people for field work, depending on the country they were in, and ONLY for intelligence gathering. She stopped all the so-called 'black-ops'. Mainly, because she could get more information using Jeff's computers and such than she could by trying to turn people in sensitive areas. So she used field personnel only for getting the tone of the country – the attitudes of the average person. None of the previous 'Ops' people were trained in Envoy techniques. Come to think of it, neither were the 'Intel' people."

"OK, I'll see what I can find out. It may mean a visit from – or to – Melanie to actually get the information, though," Mata said. "It may be classified information that she doesn't want let out."

"Understood. I'm not out to expose classified information," Muriel said. "I just want to find out what's going on, and where this is coming from. If this is a distraction, what is it a distraction FROM."

"Well, so far, we don't see anything building," Mata said. "But then, we wouldn't, would we. The whole idea would be to keep it quiet until it could be sprung on us. I'll take a look at where the old CIA people went. There IS such a thing as corporate espionage. That would be one of the first places that I'd think they'd go. So, if we can get names, we can try to follow them."

"OK, I'm going to toss this past Taylor, too. He might have some ideas," Muriel said.

"You do that. I'll make the same suggestion to Ted and his crew. I KNOW that Bart has people looking into this," Mata said. "So, what's on for today?"

"I don't know yet," Muriel replied. "I was thinking of going out and seeing what else we could get into. Talk to fire commanders and hospital administrators, and such."

"In THIS weather? Are you kidding?" asked Mata.

"Oh, come on! Set your shield to deflect the water, and generate a bit of heat, and it isn't that bad. You're just not used to weather," Muriel grinned.

"Yea? Well, you aren't either," Mata growled. "You were raised in Arizona, where they don't have any. All they have is climate."

"True. But you DO know that it's all in your head, don't you?" asked Muriel.

"Not possible," Mata replied, grumbling. "No head."

"Well, all right, then. All in your mind," Muriel answered. "It's like a version of seasonal

affective disorder. You're responding to what you think of as 'depressing' weather – gray skies and rain – without realizing that you're doing it. But if you can view rain as good and gray skies as simply a color, it won't bother you."

"Yea. Right. Why don't I believe you?" asked Mata.

"I don't know. Look, you KNOW that Carla rigged the lighting in here. It's all just shields. Just ask the shields to increase the 'sunlight' some," Muriel said. "Try it. It can't hurt."

"OH, Muriel!"

"OK, then. How about a break away. Go visit Bart. It's early enough that Ted won't be up, yet. Or visit friends in Home," Muriel said.

"You're sending me away!" Mata hollered.

"Nope. I'm offering you the opportunity to take a break. To get away from the rain and drizzle for a while," Muriel said, in quiet compassion. "There's nothing going on that can't wait a bit. I can always contact you if something comes up. You're deep enough in me to know that I can't lie to you. And I'm deep enough in you to realize that you're frustrated and depressed, and pushing yourself. You need a chance to breath – to do things that interest you – to be yourself and regain your joy of life."

"And what happens if you're attacked again?" asked Mata.

"I deal with it, if it's that urgent. If it isn't, then I wait for you so we can discuss the best way to deal with it," Muriel said. "I seriously doubt that it'll be a direct attack. More than likely, it'll be something more like what that first one was – something that's a distraction, meant to throw me off base and dedicate everything to finding out who did it. And I still don't think that that's where the real attack will come. In fact, I don't even think that these articles are aimed at me – simply about me. I think they're aimed at the potential Parliament Members. I think they're meant to throw them off their balance, and get them to try to 'annul' the consort-ship. And I think that they'll fail, for a number of reasons. First, I'm too visibly out and doing things that benefit society. Second, anything they come up with that even sounds like that is going to get trumped, hard, by Taylor. Because he KNOWS what I'm doing, and agrees with it. And we're that close that he's not going to put up with people trying that tack."

"You really think that?" asked Mata.

"Yep. They know they can't get at me, directly. And it's Taylor that they want to throw off his balance – get him to do something stupid," Muriel said. "I'm betting on it being one or more of the corporations that he's gone after. Maybe even the unions and church, but I doubt it. It may take us a while to figure out who it is, but when we do we'll roll them up and make it plain to the population what they're trying to do. And the population loves Taylor, and are coming to love me. I think. I think," she added, "that they're trying to find a way to 'get control' of Taylor again, even though they never DID have control of him. They only thought that they

did, or could get it.”

“Oh. OH! I hadn't thought of it from that standpoint,” Mata said. “So THAT'S why you wanted the list of CIA that were discharged!”

“Yep. Particularly those that were trained in spy-type trade-craft,” Muriel said. “I think some corporation hired one or more to set this up as an operation, and activate it.”

“But . . . what could he do about it, if we DO find them?” asked Mata.

“Well, first of all, we've got to let it run far enough to be able to show the whole chain, and have the hard evidence to prove it,” Muriel said. “And then, it's treason – the attempted overthrow of the government.”

“Muriel . . . this is going to put a strain on you and Taylor, if you're thinking of doing what I think you thinking of,” Mata said.

Muriel giggled. “That's an awful lot of thinking, Mata,” she said. Then went on, “Yes, we may have to play a part. Including making it look that we're no longer together. Thank goodness Carla included my apartment, and that it's Envoys that are serving both Taylor and I. We can 'angrily' separate. And he can always come to my apartment, or I back to his rooms. My apartment might be better, since the only way in is thoroughly blocked by Envoys. His rooms are guarded by the Regiment, though. And it's possible that they could be affected by all this, and make an unguarded comment about my 'sneaking back in'.”

“Oh. Oh, my. You're talking about something long term. And I was trying to find something immediate,” Mata said. “Oh, my. That helps. I never realized. It isn't the attacks that are important. It's what you and Taylor appear to do about them, and how it appears to affect you. How your public image draws in the attackers. Oh, my. Muriel, I'm sorry. I had it all wrong.”

“Maybe. Maybe I'm the one that has it wrong,” Muriel said. “All we can do is wait for the next attempt and see where it goes. If it's like I think, then the more points of attack we get, the more points we can use to extrapolate where the next one will be. And we may need that, because they may accelerate the attacks as it gets closer to election time.”

“Muriel,” Mata said, “what if it ISN'T the corporations?”

“That's another reason why we have to be patient. If it isn't them, then we need enough information to be able to figure out where it's coming from,” Muriel said. “So, either way, we have to be patient and not get bound up in it.”

“OK, let me get ahold of Melanie and let her know what your suspicions are. She may insist on doing the work, herself. Or, well actually, having it done for her rather than give us the list,” Mata said.

“Understandable,” Muriel said. “I don't really care, as long as the associations with

corporations are shown. We can even tell her which ones had offices, here. And which companies were thrown out because of bribery and attempts to 'own' the crown."

"Yea, that might be even better," Mata said. "And that would only take a second for me to put together. Hold on . . ."

Muriel waited, mentally breathing a sigh of relief. Mata seemed to have come out of the 'blue funk' she'd been in. She was more cheerful and energized, and better focused.

"Muriel," she was interrupted by the familiar voice of Melanie, "what's going on?" So Muriel outlined what had happened, how it had been countered, and the response in the comments. It was when she added in the elusiveness of the author of the article and the authors of the comments that Melanie's eyebrows raised. "Spooks," she said.

"Maybe. Or those that were cross-over that were trained in trade-craft," Muriel said. "And I have a hunch they were hired by one or more corporations that got thrown out of Britain, and the officers arrested. This is playing more like a disinformation operation to mask something more serious. And I don't think that Taylor or I are the direct targets of this. I think it's the potential Members of Parliament." Melanie just looked at her for a minute. VERY seriously.

"Muriel, I wish I'd pushed harder when I was working as National Security Advisor," she finally said.

"Pushed at what?"

"I wanted you named as head of the CIA. Girl, you THINK like a spook," Melanie said. "But I know that it's cleaner, just from the way you outlined it and aren't making assumptions. DAMN! And to think that I missed my chance to REALLY clean that mess up before it got out of hand."

"I wouldn't have taken it, Melanie," Muriel said. "Unless it was on a contract basis to Home. It's the only way I could have done it."

"Yea. I know," Melanie said, defeated. "Look, I can't just give you this information."

"Uh, huh."

"You're pushing, girl! You want ME to do it!" Melanie said.

"Actually? No. But I can understand that you don't want to let it go," Muriel said. "I really don't care about most of them. Just the ones that are connected to corporations that were in this country, or still are. And even of those, it may not be all of them that are involved. I'm just trying to narrow the field, right now. I don't expect that any action will take place for at least a month. Maybe more. But when it does, I want to roll the whole thing up with hard evidence. Right now, it looks like either treason or an external attempt to overthrow or control the government of Britain."

“OUCH! OK, I'll task this out to Henry. You know that Adam retired. Henry got his slot. So, I'll pass him this as a super-secret investigation – a direct comparison of names to positions in the various corporations. If I come up with something, we'll see about running a deeper investigation of them and their activities. If something pops out, we'll 'out-source' it to Home. OK?”

“Yep. Very. And thanks, Melanie,” Muriel said. “I'm sorry we even have to involve you in this.”

“Don't be. I think I see the shape of what you're looking for, and this will be strictly between Henry and I. I'll clear it with the FBI to make sure they realize that this is compartmentalized, and NOT for their knowledge. Just enough to keep them off Henry's neck,” Melanie said. “And I'll put teeth in it. Enough for them to know that if they even get a whiff of what's going on, that I'll have them arrested and charged with violation of the National Security act. That they WILL be informed after this is all over, and all the information laid out for them to show that it was conducted legally. GAD! I never thought I'd have to use this stuff, again. But BOY am I glad that I know my way around it. I may even have to go before Congress and explain it to them, AFTER the fact.”

“Melanie,” Muriel said, “am I putting too much on you?”

“Nope. Just enough for me to do MY job – passing it off to someone I can trust to do the job right,” Melanie said. “And I'm glad you understand MY position, and aren't arguing with me.”

“No sweat,” Muriel said, laughing. “You're making it easier for me, too. I KNOW Henry, and know that he'll handle this honestly. After all, he taught ME to nail things down with hard evidence. Nope. He'll do as well or better than I can. Thanks.”

“OK, well, I've gotta go,” Melanie said. “I'll see you the next time you wander around my area,” she added, grinning, and translated out.

Chapter 2

So . . . What Do You Want to Do? (Monday afternoon)

"So, where are we going," asked Mata, brightly.

"We?" asked Muriel. "I thought you were tied up, here."

"Not any more," Mata replied. "And, it's a nice day. I wouldn't mind getting out for a bit."

"Huh! Nice day, huh?" Muriel asked. "What about the rain?"

"Won't bother me. I either turn the personal shield to repel water, or just let it pass through me. Probably the first would be better. Civvies?"

"Yea, I thought to just work the crowds, and get an idea of what people are talking about," Muriel said. "You know . . . window shopping, maybe stopping in a few places."

"Yea, I know the drill. You used to escape Enclave and go wandering like that in Phoenix. Good thing I was smart enough to follow you in stealth. So I have an idea of how you work it," Mata said, grinning.

"YOU FINK! Spying on me!" Muriel exclaimed.

"What good is a security chief if she doesn't see to your safety?" asked Mata, STILL grinning. "So, what are you wearing?"

"Pants suit," Muriel replied. "I thought maybe the red crushed velvet with the fancy blouse."

"Nice. A little dressy, though, isn't it?" asked Mata.

"Suggestions?"

"The tan cotton one. More freedom of movement, and it shows off your figure, nicely," Mata said. "And the way you've got it fitted, you'll have all the men drooling."

"MATA!"

"Don't you 'Mata' me, young lady. Oh, you can use the same blouse with it that you were thinking of for the red velvet," Mata said, matter-of-factly. "I think I'll go with the tan pinafore."

"Pinafore? Isn't that a little old fashioned?" asked Muriel.

“Not the one I'm thinking of,” Mata said, and changed.

“WOOF! Well, I won't have to worry about men looking at me. They'll be too busy falling off the curb, staring at you and waiting for the wind to blow,” Muriel said.

“Let 'em try,” Mata mock growled back. “Like you once said, 'I can lick any man in the house!'” she added, and changed to wolf's head and licked her lips.

“Wicked, wicked girl. Now I know where I got it from,” Muriel laughed, and changed to the tan pantsuit. “Handbag,” she added. “I think I'll go with a shoulder bag. Let's see if I can remember what trash women used to put in them. If you need identification or anything, remember to pull it out of the bag.”

“Good point,” Mata said. “Oh, turn off the stripes, totally. Or turn them into a fancy broach. You don't want to attract attention.”

“Hmm. Yea, you're right. Where we're going, we definitely don't want to attract unwanted attention. I just hope we're dressy enough,” Muriel said, and translated them out.

“WOOF! Bond Street! Yea, I think we're dressy enough,” Mata said. “I think you landed us in the women's section. The RICH women's section.”

“Yea, but it was a case of 'I saw my chance, and I took it',” Muriel said, just as the rain slacked off so they could turn off the water repellent shields. “Down this way, I think.”

“What do you think of this woman that the King says he's consorted with?” asked a woman, just ahead of them. Muriel and Mata slowed down to match their speed.

“What's to think, dear,” the man beside her said. “Their business, really.”

“Well, I don't like it,” the woman said. “Not even a proper marriage. And she's foreign. Probably American, though she says she's from someplace else that nobody's ever heard of.”

“Really, m'dear,” he replied, “is it necessary to go on and on about this? We've covered it, before. Obviously, he sees something in her. Attractive enough little thing. But still, it's his business. Wish I knew how he managed to do some of the things he's done. Those flying horses that look like ghosts! Amazing. Whoever taught him those tricks really knew their stuff. Suppose it was the girl? Ah!” he said, pointing and changing the subject, successfully, “I think that's where you want to go. I'll just wait outside, if you don't mind. Makes me a bit uncomfortable seeing all those ladies underthings with women around, and me the only man.”

“Right. I'll just pop in and see what they have,” she said, and disappeared into the store. The man took up a casual stance outside, with his back obviously to the store, but near the door.

Muriel got a wicked grin on her face, and walked over to him. “Excuse me, sir. I

couldn't help hearing that you wished to know how His Majesty managed that trick with the ghost horses. If you'll show this to the guard, you'll find your answer, here," she said, handing him a card that simply said 'Office of the Ambassador', and had the Home logo on it.

"My word! And where is this?" he asked.

"Buckingham Palace. You can't miss it. Has a bunch of green clad soldiers around it," Muriel said, and sauntered off. Down the street a bit further, Mata cuffed her.

"YOU are INCOURAGABLE!" she said. Muriel just snickered.

"Well, he was nice enough to say I was attractive," she said.

"Yes, and never recognized you, face to face," Mata replied.

"So much for fame," Muriel grinned back. "Hmm. Nice jacket for Taylor. No, I'm not going to buy it. The idea isn't bad, but I'm not partial to the way it looks like a stuffed sausage. Carla can do better."

"She should. You DO know that she has a whole line of men's and women's clothing, don't you?" asked Mata.

"Of course. Where do you think I got this 'old rag'," Muriel said grinning.

"Miss?" a man's voice came from behind them.

Turning around, Muriel realized that it was the same man that she'd given the card to. "Sir?" she asked, smiling and looking up some. Muriel was tall for a woman, but the man was taller. "What can I do for you?"

"You're American, aren't you," he said, more like a statement than a question.

"I was raised there," Muriel said, wondering if she was going to have to pull out some identification.

"I noticed that you weren't really shopping. More noticing what was around, and listening," he said.

"Oh, dear! I didn't mean to offend. I just happened to be behind you when you were talking about the Home Regiment," she said.

"How is it that you have a card for the Embassy that's inside the Palace?" he asked.

"I work there," Muriel dodged. "You're not going to miss your wife, are you?"

"Oh, no. She'll be some time, yet," he replied. "So, you've seen the Ambassador?"

"Oh yes. Frequently," Muriel said, and Mata tried not to choke. "She couldn't get along without me. Well, you know how it is with important people. It's so bad that even I have a secretary."

"And she wouldn't be upset if I just dropped by?" he asked.

"Not at all. Oh, if she's out, some of her staff will make you comfortable until she gets back. She does have some odd movements, from time to time. But I'm sure she'd be happy to meet you and talk to you. She's the one that trained His Majesty in some of the tricks, you see," Muriel said. "Very pleasant woman."

"You're sure? Usually, one makes appointments to see important people," he said.

"Oh, no problem. Ambassador Muriel is very easy that way. Not stuffy at all. Believes that anyone should be able to approach her and talk to her. In fact, she usually doesn't even use her titles. Just show that card to the guard, and he or she will take you right in," Muriel said.

"Well, maybe I'd better make an appointment, anyway," he said. "But there doesn't seem to be a number on the card."

"Ah, well then, you're in luck," Muriel said. "I can do that for you. What time would be convenient? And would you like to be picked up?"

"My WORD! She'd send someone for me?" he asked.

"Of course. Your wife, too, if you like," Muriel said. "Muriel is very casual about people. Any class. You DO realize that she's the Leader of Home, don't you? A whole world in another dimension. You'll probably see me, there, too. I'm Miss White," she added, and this time Mata coughed to cover her choking.

"Miss White, it's a pleasure to meet you. If it wouldn't be too much trouble, My wife should be out in fifteen minutes or so. Could someone pick us up? We could always get a taxi from there. But I'm not sure, in this madhouse, that we'd be able to get one here," he said.

"Excellent!" Muriel said. "I'll alert the office immediately, sir. I take it that you'll be outside that store?"

"Yes. That was really the last stop that she had to make," he said. "She just loves making me uncomfortable. Only reason that she dragged me along. I've got to get back."

"Just look for someone in a gray uniform, sir. I think you're probably familiar with them?" Muriel said. "They look like this," she said, pulling a 'photograph' of Chuck out of her purse. "Whoever is sent will see that you're taken directly to the Ambassador's office."

"Really! Well, that's convenient, I must say," he said. "Thank you, Miss White. Excuse

me. Got to get back, in case she's out early," said, and turned and went back.

"Mata?"

"Already on it. Chuck will pick them up. He's already there, but stealthed. He won't show up until his wife comes out," Mata said, grinning. "You DO know that you're outrageous, don't you, 'Miss White'?"

"Of course. And, since it's after four, I'm hoping I can get Taylor there, too," Muriel said with a grin of her own. "Nothing like over-blowing that overblown wife of his. Let's get back."

::Taylor? You busy?:: asked Muriel as she translated back to her office.

"Nope. What's up?" he asked, translating in.

"Got a couple of visitors that are about to be translated in. The wife is one of those that is upset that we weren't properly married. The husband is one that's intrigued by the way you rode ghost horses," Muriel said. "I happened to be behind them when we were walking down Bond Street, and heard their discussion. So, I gave him a card. He caught up with us later, and we talked. I suggested that he 'drop by'. Chuck will bring him in as soon as his wife comes out of that 'unmentionables' shop for women."

"Oh, my. And he didn't realize who you were?" he asked.

"Nope. Oh, I gave him my name," she said. "Miss White." And Taylor started laughing. "I told him I worked here, and saw 'The Ambassador' frequently."

"Oh, you didn't!" he said. "Muriel, YOU are BAD!"

"I know. My consort says the same thing," she said, giggling.

"So, what should I wear for this?" he asked.

"Casuals, I think," Muriel said. "And I'll stay in this until after they've arrived. Let's move into the casual area. They should be coming any time, now. And how was your day?"

"Actually, not bad," Taylor said. "No new attempts at lawsuits against the crown. And I spoke to a delegation of contractors that actually was pleasant. They wanted to know about the use of Envoy techniques in building. I assured them that, if they weren't already approved, they soon would be. They're forming a guild and telling the union to go hang. Ten of them, and they've already gotten themselves organized. I told them that if there was any problem with getting the guild made an official organization, that they should contact me, or at least my office."

"GOOD! That puts it right at the top," Muriel said. "And shows that you're accessible to the 'common people'."

"Yep. That's rather what I thought. Someone I know was always doing things like that," he said with a smile. "I'm just taking after her."

"Well, I hope not the same way you take after her in the evening," Muriel said, grinning. And Taylor choked.

"Um, no. NOTHING like that," he said. "But seriously, Muriel, you've always been that way, and managed to straighten things out, successfully, and show people that you're accessible. I finally figured out why you do that, and we'll see how it works for me. Have you had tea?"

"Nope. Not yet. Mind waiting until the guests arrive?" she asked.

"OH! No problem," he said, taking his seat next to her.

Chapter 3

Surprise, Surprise!

(Monday afternoon, later)

A bell rang, once, just above a man's head. His wife looked up, then clutched at her husband. And in front of them, a man in a gray uniform gently landed.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Chuck. I understand that you wanted to see the Ambassador. I'll take you directly to her office."

"How?" asked the woman. Then looked around and realized she was no longer on the street. "Where are we?" Chuck moved away, smiling, and they saw they were facing a desk with another uniformed person, this time a woman, smiling at them.

"Good afternoon," Mata said. "Welcome to the office of the Leader of Home and Ambassador to the people of earth."

"I remember you!" the man said. "You were with Miss White."

"Yes, I was. I often go with her when she goes out. I'm her security chief," Mata said.

"Oh, good!" Muriel said from their side, "Come in. Chuck will be coming with tea in a moment. Come in and sit down." As she proceeded toward her chair, she heard a gasp.

"Y-Y-Your Majesty!" the man said, bowing, as Taylor stood.

"Ah, yes. You must be the couple that Muriel told me about," he said. "Come in, sit down. Relax. We were about to have tea. Please, join us."

The man looked back at 'Miss White, and his eyes goggled. "You"

"Yes, I'm Miss White," Muriel said, still standing, but now in her fighting Class A uniform. "Actually, it's Muriel White. And yes, I'm the Ambassador, and all those other titles that I seldom use. Come, sit. Please. Welcome to my office. And yes, the Ambassador would be lost without me. After all, where would I be if I wasn't me?" she said, and grinned.

"Muriel tells me that you were wondering how I managed to ride a ghost horse," Taylor said. "It's really just an application of the Envoy training that I've had. In fact, Muriel was the one that trained me. It's another one of her titles, and the one she enjoys the most. Well, you know our names. Can we ask yours?"

"Oh, I'm Ralph. Ralph Cramdon" he said. "This is my wife, Millie. Your Majesty"

"Please. Just Taylor. In here, I'm out-ranked. Being the Leader of Home – which is a whole universe, really – she ranks higher than a mere monarch of a country," Taylor said.

“Besides, Ralph, it's much nicer to be able to talk to people simply as a person, without all the bother of the titles. In fact, I think I've used the titles more in the past few weeks than I ever did as Prince. So many people who think they're important coming to me to try to convince me of their importance, and then trying to tell me how to do my job and run my life.”

“And you're really the”

“I'm the Leader of Home. Yes. Which simply means that the Envoys of Home feel that I'm doing what needs to be done, so they go along with it. I'm not a ruler,” Muriel said. “It's just that I seem to be showing them the way to go into the future. And as for how I know I'm the Leader, well, the young lady at the desk is the focal point, the spokesperson, for all the Envoys. They made the decision, and passed it to her. Her name is Mata, and yes, she's an Envoy.”

“She's . . . ,” Millie said.

“An Envoy. A person from another world,” Muriel said. “An energy form, actually. Intelligent energy. The body is just something that she puts on. It's all done with shields. And that's how Taylor was able to ride a ghost horse. The shield is programed to move in certain ways, and follows where he goes. He doesn't need it. He can fly on his own.”

“Fly”

“Oh, yes. Well, anyone with training can,” Muriel said. “We found it out when I was twelve. A bunch of my friends even created a game using the flying. VERY fast game. I've flown a number of times, myself, when I wasn't playing the game. Just because I couldn't get to where I wanted to be, because of a crowd, so I walked over the top of them, about ten feet off the ground. And all of the Regiment of Home can do it. They're all humans that have had the training. Haven't you ever wished you could fly, Millie?”

“N-N-No! I'd be too scared!” Millie said.

“Oh, with the training, there's nothing to be scared of,” Muriel said. “One of the first things you learn is how to make a personal shield. And believe me, NOTHING gets past that shield that could hurt you. And that includes the ground. Long before you reach it, the shield would have realized what was happening, and slowed you down, and stopped you a foot above the ground.”

“Oh, my!”

“Yea. It's quite a trip. I giggled for about fifteen minutes after I did it,” Muriel said. “Of course, I was only twelve at the time,” Muriel added. “Between that and being shot at, a number of times, I learned how to set the shield so I didn't even have to tell it to do something. Just an open ended 'protect me', and it does. Oh, I can still set it to keep from getting wet in the rain. It can also keep me warm or cool, as may be. There are other things, too. But you'll learn about them if you ever take the training.”

“Me?” Millie asked.

“No reason why not. It doesn't take very long. Maybe four days, at the most. We've even got a brand new building that has all sorts of rooms and suites in it, just for that purpose. Shortest time it took was about a quarter of a day. But we don't like to rush it like that,” Muriel said.

“Why do you do this?” asked Ralph.

“Why not?” Muriel replied. “Humans were meant to have this training. In fact, it was meant to open up in them all by itself. But something went wrong. It's been corrected, and many kids now being born won't have that problem. They'll grow into it, naturally. Or, do you mean me, personally? It was the first part of this job that I had, training people. Even before I was fully trained, I started training my friends. Twelve of them all at one time. Oh, I had help. The Envoys helped. Mata, especially. And they're still surprising me, and, I guess, I'm still surprising them.”

“You said something, earlier, about the Envoys being intelligent power,” Ralph said. “There isn't any such thing. I teach physics in college. I should know.”

“Uh, huh. Ralph, how many different types of power are there in the universe?” asked Muriel. “Oh, I guess you'd call it 'energy' rather than power. And I'm not talking about how many sources. Just the types of power.”

“I don't know! I never really counted them. Electrical, chemical, biological, potentials like kinetic”

“Sound, light, magnetic, gravitational, fusion, and combinations of them, such as orbital that combines the kinetic energy of the velocity of a mass with the counter of the gravitational force of a larger mass,” Taylor quietly said. “Plus whatever dark matter is. Then there's molecular and atomic energy. The list DOES go on a bit. The point that Muriel's getting to is that all those types of energy and all those sources create strands. Those strands combine to do various things that science is only just beginning to see, and doesn't understand yet. What they do is create the potential for matter, which creates the potential for more energy. When those strands combine, though, they don't have to create matter. They can create something else – the potential for thought, by making connections between the strands. The more complex this bundle of strands, the more potential for thought. It's like making connections in a computer. Eventually, one will be built that will be self-aware.”

“And that's basically all that Envoys are,” Muriel added. “Energy that has become self-aware and has intelligence. Energy that has enough intelligence to be able to manipulate other energy, yet at the same time is constantly being renewed, because they're still connected to the rest of the universe and all that energy.”

“But . . . you're talking about the possibility that there's millions of them!” Ralph said.

“Oh, far more than that. Trillions. Trillions of trillions,” Taylor said. “The universe that

the Envoys come from is far larger than ours. In fact, ours is just a pocket universe – a place they built, for the purpose of trying to jump-start the next level of evolution for themselves. And then, they discovered that, by doing that, they were jump-starting the evolution of another life-form.”

“Ralph, Millie, I'm going to butt in for a moment,” Mata said, leaving her chair. “Humans have known a bit about Envoys for a long time. What does the name 'Envoy' mean?”

“What? Oh. An Envoy is a messenger,” Ralph said.

“Yep. We're messengers,” Mata said. “And for centuries, that's all that humans knew. There was a much older name for us. MUCH older. And it came from the Greek, and that may not have been the ultimate source word. What's that word that means 'messenger'?”

“I don't know. I never really studied Greek,” Ralph said.

“You don't need to have,” Muriel said. “The reason that the word has continued into modern languages – and yes, there's more than one language that has adopted the word or a variation of it – is because religions have used it.”

“Angels,” Millie whispered.

“Angels,” Mata confirmed. “We don't use that title anymore, because the source of those religions no longer exists. It was a parasite that was feeding off the forced enslavement of Envoys and humans – their worship. But, that's what we were,” she said, and began to glow, and wings appeared. And she changed to a middle-aged male. “My name is unpronounceable by humans, or by Envoys trying to use human speech. We, Envoys, adopted human names to make it easier for people to speak to us. I was called Matthew. Then Ted, who was the original Leader of Home, started calling us by nicknames. Mine was Matt. Well, Ted asked for help in teaching another human – a twelve year old girl. So, I changed to female and about twelve, and came in and introduced myself. But Envoys aren't infallible. I forgot to come up with a girl's name and very intelligently said, 'Hi! I'm Mat . . . uh' REAL intelligent. And that twelve year old girl, Muriel, ran with it. I've been Mata ever since,” she resumed her normal self, and grinned.

“And it's been a running joke, for years, that was deadly serious. She doesn't worry about all the esoteric theory. She just goes out and combines ideas and makes things work. And she TEACHES. Oh, boy, does she teach. She can't seem to go anywhere without finding someone new to teach. Worse, she teaches US!” Mata said, sitting down with the group. “Sure, we could fly. We never asked WHY we could, we just did it. And we never suspected that humans could. After all, humans had mass. All we were was energy. And she did it. Then another human analyzed it and figured out why, and handed that information back to her. Then her friends were taught to fly, and they developed a game that made the US Air Force obsolete. Except that she taught THEM, and they became their own planes. And so it goes.”

"And that's why she's THE Leader of Home. Ted's still around, and A Leader of Home. But even HE follows her and learns from her," Taylor said.

"And someday, someone else will come along and displace me the same way," Muriel said. "So, you see, I'm nobody important. What I do is. But me? I'm just an ordinary girl doing a job. And that job is to give others the opportunity to learn. To give them the basics, and some advanced information that's built off those basics, and turn them loose to create their own ways of doing things. I don't have all the answers, despite all those pieces of parchment up there on the wall. I just keep going and doing, and combining new ways of doing things. And others take those new ways and add to them, and feed them back. Make sense?"

"You say that Envoys are energy that has intelligence and self-awareness. But what IS that? Humans have the same intelligence and self-awareness," Ralph said.

"Not quite the same," Muriel said, "because the connections are slightly different. But very similar, and both can use the same abilities. But I think you're asking a more basic question. What is an Envoy? What is it called in more common speech? And the answer is 'soul'." And the connections were made.

"We'll take it from here, Muriel," a strange Envoy said, smiling. "No problem. We'll take them to The Welcoming One, and make them comfortable, and get them through the rest of the training. Some of us will come out whenever you find a new one, so you don't have to try to find out if we have rooms available or get them registered. And we're all doctors as well as trainers. And some of us have learned the tricks used by Carla and the clothiers in the American Enclave, so we can get them dressed according to what they feel is appropriate. When they're comfortable with this 'newness' we'll bring them back. Probably Wednesday morning. They'll need some time to let this settle in."

"Thanks. And thank your manager, too. He's really got you organized and aware," Muriel said.

"Hey, what can I say! He feels that he's in competition with the Guest House in America," the Envoy said, laughing. "That one was always highly organized. But our manager is trying to build on it, and make things easier for you. Oh, and an update for you. We've been getting people in that were close to breakthrough and taking them through the rest, using your techniques. We've also been going out and looking for them, but mostly in the poorer and middle class areas. We'll start looking in the richer sections, too, now."

He then turned to Millie and Ralph. "Come, folks, we've got rooms for you, and people to take care of you, help you past the rough points and help you feel secure," he said, quietly and with some humor. "Muriel missed a couple of things that Envoys are. We're protectors and nurturers as well as trainers and the message that the training is. We'll show you what you can do with your new abilities, and how to get into deeper contact with yourself. Really, it's easy. Just new. And think of what your friends will think when they realize that you have these new abilities and can help them."

“Oh, my,” Muriel said, as the Envoys from The Welcoming One translated the Cramdons out.

“Yea,” Mata said. “They’re starting to compete. Which means that they’re starting to go beyond just being Envoys. You DO know what caused this, don’t you?”

“Nope,” Muriel replied.

“You appreciate them. They’re like children. Show your acceptance and appreciation of what they accomplish, and it prompts them to do more. Every time you thanked the Guest House manager for what he’d done – for what he felt was simply his job,” Mata said. “And he liked that feeling of being appreciated. So he tried to make it better, to out-do himself. What had started as a job became a challenge. Now, others have looked at it, and decided that they want some of that feeling, themselves. So, they push themselves to do more.”

“I didn’t have the heart to tell him,” Mata said, “but every time I went to get somebody registered with Guest House, the manager already knew and was ready for them, and had rooms set aside for them. And all his staff are doctors in Envoy style medicine, though not as accomplished as Fran and a few others scattered around this earth. And some of them are pretty good at helping people design clothing. So, what this one is doing isn’t really all that new, other than the fact that they’re coming to you instead of you going to them. And that they’re going out, themselves, and finding people.”

“Envoys in competition?” asked Muriel. “Isn’t that going to cause trouble?”

“No, because they do it as a game. And everything is fed back into the common pool for others to use,” Mata said. “They do it just for the joy of doing, not because they have to feel that they’re the best. And now, the appreciation they get is from each other. And that puts a whole new perspective on what they do.”

“Oh, my. I’ve created a monster!” Muriel said.

“No,” Mata replied, laughing. “You’ve created teachers that challenge each other. And you two need to get going. You’ve got dinner and that concert to get to. And if you’re up late, tomorrow morning, don’t worry about it.” And laughing at Mata’s ‘mothering’, they translated out.

Chapter 4

Answers

(Wednesday morning)

::Muriel, are you awake?::

::For hours, Melanie. What's up?::

::We found your 'operatives'. There are four corporations that hired the field officers. But the lead is the one that really surprised us. It's diversified from its original purpose – well, it did that back in the late fifties. A second one was from another country, and created computer-style games and hardware. Both entertainment companies. The third really isn't a corporation as much as an organization for controlling oil prices. And the fourth is a new organization made up of a number of other corporations of dubious value. Banks and Private Equity, and Hedge Funds. So . . . one in America, one in Japan, one in Venezuela, and one in Britain. Mata's got the list of names and locations.::

::Thanks, Melanie. Any trouble getting that past Congress?::

::Nope. Henry simply told them that he was concerned with what happened with these people, since they really weren't suited for any other work than espionage. And all the information came through 'normal' channels – looking at hires all across the world. Resumes, and such. Most of them were on the Internet. So, since it didn't require invasive procedures to find, Congress just tossed it off as an internal exercise for the FBI.::

::Oh, I'll have to kid him. And he used to say that I was bad,:: Muriel laughed.

::You are,:: Melanie replied. ::Where'd you THINK he learned how to work the system. Well,:: she added, ::I'd better get back to work.::

::Thanks, Melanie. I owe you one.::

::Actually, you don't owe me anything. As we got looking at the information your request generated, we discovered that the same thing is going on over here. So, you alerted us to a potential problem. Keep us informed as to what you find. Oh, you can do that through Henry. He's always wanted to see Britain.:: And Muriel joined Melanie's laughter. ::And try to keep us informed of what you find. I think they're all tied together.::

::I will, Melanie. And thanks again. And thank Henry. I will, personally, when I get a chance.::

Muriel looked over at a gloating Mata. "I heard," Mata said. "NOW, we have a direction from. That's a GOOD start. And I've got the names. They're scattered all over Britain, but five of them are right here in London. Most of them are on work visas, but a couple have actually applied for citizenship. And all of them have listed their employers. We

were very close to one of the businesses when we translated back from Bond Street. You might want to give the British list to Taylor, and tell him what Melanie found, too. Fred's running the names and finding out any of their communication. Fascinating reading. Especially their cover jobs. Here's the list," Mata said, sending it to Muriel, "and I'll get you the rest of the information as I get it."

"OK, I'll go see if Taylor's free. If not, I'll wait with Janice for him," Muriel said, and translated out.

"But sir, this isn't the way things are done," Muriel heard, as she entered Taylor's office in civilian clothes. "What you're advocating is against everything that the free market is about. You'll destroy everything that we've done for Britain!" a man was saying to Taylor.

Muriel went directly to Janice's desk. "Mind if I hang out here until he's finished? And can I use your printer?" she asked, sitting down in front of Janice's desk.

"You're always welcome, here. And I don't think it'll be much longer. I think Taylor's ready to lower the boom. Oh," Janice added, "feel free to use the printer. Anything good?"

"See for yourself," Muriel replied. "Just keep it quiet. Very sub rosa. And you KNOW what's under the rose, don't you? Thorns." Janice snickered, then read the page that left the printer.

"Oh, my. I see what you mean. Yes, this will be kept VERY quiet," Janice said. "And it may give Taylor more ammunition. But I think we'll keep it here until he's done. But it does suggest a possible reason for your attack."

"Yep. My thinking, exactly. Janice, you may hear and see a great deal in this office that's meant to be kept quiet until the proper time," Muriel began.

"Don't I just know it. But Taylor's already cautioned me about that, and given me the 'National Security' speech. Oh," Janice said, "and my classification is upped to the highest that there is. But I appreciate why you had to say something."

"Well, sir," Muriel heard Taylor's quiet voice, "I've heard all those arguments before, and I've seen where they led. They were spurious arguments before, and haven't gained any veracity in the repetition. So, now we'll try things my way. If you don't like it, you can always move your organization to another country that might go along with you. Of course, that would mean that you'd no longer be able to play in the British stock market, or have dealings in this country. But I'm sure you can understand why, if you think about it. Now, I see that my next appointment is here. Feel free to return when you have something to say that makes sense," he added, dismissing the man. Muriel kept her head averted until the man had left. Then grinned at Janice, and got up and went to Taylor.

"What are YOU grinning about," asked Taylor, in good humor.

"Melanie came through for us. You'll love the results," she said, handing him the page.

"This is just our part of it. Mata has the complete list with all the connections, if you want it. Fred's still working on it, though, so you wouldn't really get the whole picture until he's done. It shouldn't be long. Maybe tomorrow."

"We don't dare touch them, yet," Taylor said. "But at least we've got direction FROM, so we're a jump ahead. Oh, by the way, Janice is cleared."

"I know. We talked. I would have expected nothing less," Muriel said. "You can't very well pass sensitive stuff past her and expect her to NOT notice it. She'd have to be cleared for it."

"Yea. One of the mistakes your CIA pulled. The secretaries were typing the stuff up, and putting it in those fancy binders, and didn't have the clearance to read what they were typing. Idiots. That's treating people like machines, and ignoring the fact that they DO think," Taylor said.

"Yep. So, when they thought they had a secure cell of six people, they actually had twenty or more, and half of them weren't cleared for the information," Muriel said. "They were expected to be too stupid to understand what they were typing." And she snickered.

"Well, if Janice has seen this, then I don't see any reason why she shouldn't coordinate some of it. I'll put my 'snoop' squad on it, and have them keep her informed of developments, and warn me when things start ramping up, and the direction, and such," Taylor said. "How are things going with Millie and Ralph?"

"Good. OH! SHOOT! They should be showing up, soon. I've gotta get back. Sorry, dear. I DID think that you'd want this right away, though," Muriel said, and translated out.

"Always operating at a dead run, in order to demonstrate how relaxed she is," Taylor mused. Janice just snickered.

"Yea, but she does a good job of it," she said. "If you wish, I can get the list to your analysis team. That'll leave you free for at least an hour. I can stretch that, if you like." Taylor just looked at her. "Go. You know you want to be there. It's the biggest thing in their lives. The King took a personal interest in them, and talked to them like real people." And Taylor laughed, waved, and translated out.

Taylor translated to a point outside Muriel's office and walked in. "Hello dear," he said. "Not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Nope. The Cramdons just got here. Grinning," Muriel said.

"Ah! Good. Ralph, do you ride?" asked Taylor. "And do you know dressage?"

"Yes to both. Why?" asked Ralph.

"Because you wanted to know how the Regiment of Home could ride ghost horses.

That was the whole reason you came out here, isn't it?" Taylor asked, smiling.

"Well, yes. But after all this?"

"No time like the present. I won't put you through everything that the Regiment goes through. But I can show you the basics and make you comfortable with it," Taylor said, and led the man outside. As Taylor introduced Ralph to the creation of a ghost horse, specifying that he should pick a horse that he knew well, and simply create the image of it and turn it into shields, Muriel talked with Millie.

"I understand that you're a bit upset with the fact that Taylor and I are Consorts under the rules of Home, rather than married by the rules of Britain," she said.

"I"

"Oh, nothing to be ashamed of. The rules of Home are different, and few people on earth realize HOW different," Muriel said, gently and smiling. "There are no contracts in Home. And marriage is a contract. Unfortunately, it's a contract that would restrict what I can do to help people. Especially with the people around that want to tell Taylor how to rule, and how to run his private life. So, let me tell you what being a consort is all about from the standpoint of Home."

"People in Home become consorts for various reasons. In a sense, it IS a contract, but it's one contracting with oneself," she said. "You see, those in Home understand what personal responsibility is. So, when they decide to become consorts, it's because they have interests that overlap that draw them together – at least for a while. And they accept the responsibility of continuing the consort-ship for the duration of whatever project they're on, together."

"For a while. But not forever," said Millie.

"Ah. That's what bothers you," Muriel said. "But look at the divorces, here, in THIS world. Then realize that Envoys live thousands of times longer. Forever would be a long time. And people – even Envoys – DO change over time. And, on top of that, realize that whatever contracts people had when they were alive no longer exist when they die. At least, not as far as Home is concerned. So, marriages end at death, too. No, the reason for people consorting with each other is to fulfill a purpose. And yes, children are a purpose. And personal responsibility tells one that children must be supported and protected and taught until they are old enough and able enough to be on their own. And yes, human souls DO consort in Home. And, since the only difference between an Envoy and a human soul is that the human soul has human experiences, you can expect that those human souls will draw on their earthly experiences."

"You mean . . . ? But I thought there wasn't any of that in Home!" Milly said.

"HA! Humans with memories of good experiences, and the knowledge of how to create shields? You've got to be kidding. No, what there isn't is a marriage contract that

enslaves a woman to a man – well, actually, the slavery works both ways. But in the case of the woman, there's no legalized rape, no ownership of a woman simply because of her gender. That's what that passage meant. In Home, there are no children born, so that doesn't factor into it. People enjoy each other's company in a variety of ways. That's only one of them. But the biggest reason for being consorts is because the people involved have similar interests – are studying or working on the same or similar things. So, they are consorts while that's going on. But when it ends or branches into separate things, they part. Some consort-ships have lasted hundreds of years. Others, only a year or two.”

“And you and His Majesty?” asked Millie.

“It's Taylor. In here, or when we're private, it's just Taylor,” Muriel said. “And no, he won't take offense. When you throw up a title, you throw up a barrier. He's trying to reduce the barriers. And I agree. Anyway, Taylor and I created this consort-ship for the purpose of being together – sharing our lives – in the purpose of trying to clean up the societies of earth. At least enough that the worst injustices were ended. And it will take longer than we will live. Will we have children? Probably. At least, I know of no barrier to it. Will one of them rule? Very likely. But it will be their choice, not something that they're forced into or something that they're unsuited for. Taylor and I are friends that care deeply for each other, and help each other as best we can. That hasn't always been the case in royal marriages.”

“But . . . it's still temporary. And it's not sanctioned,” Millie said.

“You mean by the church. You've been to Home. You know the facts, now. There's nothing there. And a consort-ship need not be temporary. It is what the consorts want it to be. In this case, it's a commitment to each other to stand by their consort, and do the best they can to shelter, nurture, protect and care for them,” Muriel said. “It's actually more far reaching than a marriage contract, and more equal between the partners. And there's none of the trash that some people wanted to add. Making Home a satellite of Britain just wasn't going to happen.”

“Oh!”

“Yep. That's the reason so many people tried to force us to be married. And it was Taylor that ended that fiasco,” Muriel said. “He threatened to take himself out of the succession, leaving Britain with no one as monarch. It would have resulted in anarchy for a bit, then the eventual creation of an Enclave of all of Britain under the rule of Home. THAT'S why we resorted to using the rules of Home to sanction our being together. And the Envoys, themselves, sanctioned it through their spokesperson. So, you see? The rules have been followed. Britain is safe, and has a monarch that will do whatever he can – what ever he has to – to help his people. And I am free to help ALL the people of earth, which is what my job is.”

“I never realized. I'm so sorry, Muriel,” she said.

“Yea, that's the problem. Too many people have been trying to say that we aren't married because it wasn't in the church. But first, they don't know the facts. And second,

they're the same people that have tried, repeatedly, to gain some sort of power over both Taylor and I," Muriel said. "They think that Home is defenseless. It isn't. It's quite capable of completely destroying the earth. Yet, some of the population of Home have come to earth to help people. And the rest back them. That's the difference between the greedy, and the ones that care about everyone."

"What can I do to help?" asked Millie.

"Tell people what you know about being a consort. Tell them what you know about Taylor and I. The more people that spread the word, the harder it is for the jerks to spread their lies and rumors," Muriel said. "We're working it from the other side, trying to find out who they are, and make it impossible for them to continue their mission. Some of them are actually engaging in acts that are against the law. And we're gathering evidence against them, and will eventually arrest them. But that's a long, slow process and they're being cagey. So, we need to be thorough. That's all behind the scenes. What you can do, convincing people that the consort-ship is the best way to go in this situation, would be a great help."

Chapter 5

Who is the Greater Criminal?

(Wednesday afternoon)

“So, Millie, do you ride?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, not like Ralph,” she said. “I’ve done a little, though. There’s this sweet little palfrey – well, she isn’t really a palfrey as such, but she does have a nice smooth gait. But she’s not a hunter, or anything like that.”

“Well, I learned on saddlebred horses, myself. That, and quarter horses. But I bet you could come up with an image of that horse that we could turn into a ‘ghost’ horse. There’s certainly enough trails around that we could use,” Muriel said. “Ever do dressage?”

“Not very well, I think my teacher gave up on me,” Millie said.

“Oh, can we have a surprise for him, then,” Muriel grinned. “Come on. Let’s show the men how it’s done.” And they went outside to the compound. The first order of business was to get Millie to visualize the horse, and turn it into shields. It took a couple of attempts, but when she got it, the shields sprang into existence and solidified enough for the woman to mount and seat properly. Muriel quickly ‘conjured up’ a quarter horse, and mounted. Millie took the time to change into riding clothes, first, then assumed her own position.

“OK, here’s the trick of it. You don’t really have to use the reins. You use your mind. So, before we start, let me send you the information Taylor gave me on dressage. He extended it a bit, and I don’t suggest you use some of it, as it’s what was used in warfare by the knights. So, not yet, anyway. We may get into that, later,” and Muriel dumped the information into Millie.

“Where are Taylor and my husband?” asked Millie.

“Probably showing off out front, if I’m reading the cheering right,” Muriel said. “We can top what they’re doing, by doing synchronized dressage.”

“How? I’m not that good!”

“We link the ‘ghost horses’. No matter what happens, just stay upright. The horses will do the whole thing,” Muriel said, grinning. “Mind you, part of this will be outrageous. You won’t fall, no matter what. OK?”

“No! What are you going to do?” asked Millie.

“Well, after we’ve introduced ourselves by slow prancing out in front of the boys, and doing some synchronized dressage, we’ll reverse, and do it upside down,” Muriel said.

“And I won't fall? How?”

“Well, the trick is to tell your saddle not to let go of you. Like the sticky on your personal shield,” Muriel said.

“OH! OK. I HOPE I can keep up with you and not panic,” Millie said.

“Tell you what. We'll do a bit in here, so you'll see that it can be done, safely,” Muriel said, and they started across the compound. About halfway there, Muriel reversed direction while Millie went on. They turned near the extents of the open area, and headed back the other way, perfectly in step. When they reached the other side, instead of turning, the horses mounted the walls and went back the other way upside down. Still in perfect step with each other. Then down the walls, and crab stepped toward each other until they were in line with the archway to the outside. Then they went back to their synchronized slow prance toward the outside.

Sure enough, Taylor and Ralph were trying to out-do each other with 'neck or nothing' stunts that should have killed them both. And the crowd was egging them on – until Muriel and Millie appeared. They bisected the area, then turned opposite directions at the main gate and described the other three sides of two joined rectangles, leaving a glowing trail behind them the whole way. They met back up at the arch, and moved toward the halfway point from there to the gate. There, they turned away, and headed toward the center point of the outer edges of the boxes. And, instead of turning, they simply mounted the air and turned upside down.

::Why, you sneaky little thing. You're trying to upstage me,:: Taylor sent, laughing.

::I don't have to try,:: Muriel responded, as the two women described an 'impossible' move of rotating counter to each other in order to affect a pass without leaving their line. ::I'm succeeding,:: Muriel sent, with a grin.

They reached the other end of the two squares, and simply 'walked' down, and resumed their prance on the ground, toward each other. There, they turned toward the gate and stopped, and the two women described a bow over the horses necks. Millie then went and joined the two men, face flushed with excitement. Muriel, in the mean time, switched from her uniform to jeans and decorated shirt, cowboy boots, and Western hat. At the same time, her saddle switched from English to Western.

“Oh, oh!” Taylor hollered. “NOW we're in for it.”

And they were. Muriel started by doing a tight figure eight – which meant the horse switched it's lead at every turn – and then expanded it by increasing her speed until she was at a complete gallop. Then, she stopped, facing the gate, again. Suddenly, she rose up in the stirrups, and the horse reared. She grabbed her hat, waved it over her head, and whooped, then took off back through the arch at a break-neck speed, still whopping.

“OK,” Taylor said. “I'm not going to try to top that. Let's go, people.” And he laughed,

and trotted his horse back through the arch, followed by Ralph and Millie, side by side.

"Did we really do all that?" asked Millie.

"Yea . . .," Ralph said. "It IS kinda hard to believe, isn't it? How'd you do that upside down thing?"

"Sticky saddle, like what we use on the personal shield," Millie said. "She made me do it inside, so I wouldn't panic, outside."

"GAD! The stuff you were doing. And matching each other. Unreal," her husband said.

"Yea, she told the 'ghost' horses to do it together. I could feel her telling them what to do. All I had to do was sit there," Millie said. "How'd you do with Taylor?"

"The man's insane! Or absolutely fearless," Ralph said. "No way I could keep up with him. And I thought I was a good rider. We have a King. One to be proud of." They reached Muriel's office, and dismounted, and the horses disappeared.

Inside, Taylor and Muriel were laughing, and Muriel motioned them in. "After I saw what you did with the Regiment," she was saying, "I went out back and started learning Western rodeo riding and dressage. The look on your face, though." And she laughed again.

"Well, that upside-down dressage about blew me away," Taylor said. "But then you started with the figure eights. There's no way a real horse could have kept it's feet on those turns. Especially on that paving."

"I know. It was tough even on a ghost horse. It didn't have any mass, but I did," she said. "I literally had to fly it to stay in the saddle."

"What'll you have, people," Taylor said. "After that, you need something to calm down and relax with. And my insane consort that's too busy laughing to get someone isn't any help."

"Oh, hush, Taylor," Muriel said. "He's already on his way. How are you doing, Millie?"

"Fine. That was unreal!" she said. "I never would have thought I could have ridden upside down like that. And enjoyed it!"

"Oh, heck," Muriel said, "that's tame stuff. What got the crowd was the fact that we were in sync with each other. I would have pulled three barrel racing on them, except that that's actually easier than the figure eights. It just looks flashy. Or, if I'd had time to do it, calf roping. But these people haven't ever seen stuff like that. It's why I like quarter horses."

"Why are they named that?" asked Millie.

"Because they were meant for quarter mile races," Muriel said. "And they make good cutting horses and such. They're sprinters, and can take off and hit about fifty-five miles an hour in a quarter mile. Morgans are nice for that, though there are others. They're gentle and strong, and fast. And smart. They all came from one horse owned by Justin Morgan and the breed was named after the man. Developed during the Colonial period just before the revolution, they were the working horse for people that needed something that they could use for work, then turn around and hitch to a cart for shopping or going to church."

Chuck entered, then and interrupted. "I didn't know what you wanted, but for the sort of shocks and exercise you've been doing, I thought maybe iced tea would be best. You need the liquids and you need to cool down, some. I'll be back in a bit to see if you'd like a snack," he said, smiling.

"Thanks, Chuck," Muriel said.

"Yea, thanks, Chuck," Ralph said. "I've heard of this. Never tried it," he added, taking a sip. "Strange. I'm trying VERY hard to take this with an open mind. British people just don't do iced tea. I think it's a cultural thing, really."

"Well, if I can get you something else, let me know," Chuck said, and left for the snacks.

"What line of work are you in, Ralph?" Muriel asked.

"Hmm? Oh, I was a bank manager. Got disillusioned with it, though. I could see what it was doing to the people," Ralph said. "The bank was quite happy to take people's money, but reluctant to let them have it back. And the fees and fines kept building up. It got so bad that I was beginning to wonder who was the worst criminal, the person that robbed a bank or the one that owned it. Looking around for something better."

"So, you're not working, now?" asked Taylor.

"Well, I've got some money from other things. Helped people start businesses and such, and get a small stipend from those," Ralph said. "Should tide me over until I can find something else. Plus I've had this temporary job with the college, teaching basic physics to dunderheads. Finished, now that the original teacher is back to work."

"But you know the banking industry," Taylor persisted.

"Well, yes, you could say," Ralph said.

"Hmm. I might have something you could do, then, if you're interested," Taylor said. "It would at least keep you going for a while, if you discovered that you didn't like it."

"Oh? What's that?" asked Ralph.

"I was thinking of setting up an investigation of the banking industry. And, well," Taylor

said, "I've always been more military, and don't really know that side of life. Too busy, right now, to give it the study it needs. But would like to see what some of the abuses are, and maybe how to eliminate them."

"Sounds interesting. How many people did you have in mind?" Ralph asked.

"Oh, only one human. At least at first. But you'd have a squad of Envoys that you'd supervise. And, of course, those phenomenal computers that a friend of Muriel's developed," Taylor said. "They pretty much do the work for you. Tell you what. I'd like to try you out in it. Salary, full benefits, of course. Flexible time. Like to see your take on where the problems and abuses are. Things like costs compared to profit for the bank. Well, you know."

"Well . . . that's a kind offer, indeed!" Ralph said. "But, where would I work?"

"Taylor," Muriel said, sharply. "Are you sure you want to hire him? I could always hire him, myself, and find a place for him and a squad. And think of what I could offer him."

"Wait a minute! Are you trying to hire him away from me before I even get him hired?" asked Taylor. "This is a British problem. Oh, we'd send you information on anything that was international, if that's what worries you. In a sense, he'd be part of the analysis section, but his own boss, so there's bound to be some sharing back and forth. And I know how important some of these things are to you, so of course your section would be copied in on what we find. But you're looking at a broader view and international law, where I'd have him looking specifically at British law."

"It's more than a British problem, though I'll admit that it is that, too," Muriel said. "And we'd be looking at it from the laws of ALL the countries. He might need more than one squad, when it gets going. Besides, I can put him on Ambassador status, and you can't. You lost your privilege to make other Ambassadors when you downgraded to being just a liaison. Might keep him out of trouble when he starts getting too close to something. And as the Leader of Home, I can give him and his wife immediate sanctuary on entering ANY property of Home. And you KNOW how Home works. Any property with an Ambassador is automatically an Embassy, no matter how large or small."

"And what happens if I want to task him in some other area?" asked Taylor.

"We talk. I'm not against multiple tasking. Or even re-tasking. We can always add on more people or Envoys, as needed. And you'd have full access to his information, AND be able to make suggestions of possible areas to investigate," Muriel said. "I wouldn't be taking him away from you. I'd be giving him a wider range to investigate. Like movements between banks in different countries."

"Oh," Taylor said. "How would the reporting go, then?"

"How do you want it?" Muriel replied. "He sends reports to me – well, actually Mata, unless he needs to discuss something with me – and he sends a copy to you or who you designate with the same provision. I don't see any emergency situations that would be

possible with an investigation like this, but should one come up, he contacts whichever one of us he can reach first, regardless of the area or scope involved. We talk. We're not in competition, here. And we're scaring the troops." And Taylor laughed.

"You've just been treated to how Muriel and I work things out," Taylor said. "And, I think I know where she's going with this, now. Muriel, you're talking about him being the beginning of your 'Special Investigator' squads, starting with Banking. But you don't have the room, here, to put four more squads. Or five, if you want one squad specifically tasked with analysis. Right?"

"Yep. YOU set up the office. Just make sure there's enough room for him to add squads, and a break room large enough to contain all of them, if they're Envoys," Muriel said.

"Sold," Taylor laughed. "Ralph, talk to your new potential boss. She just out-bid me."

"Almost," Muriel said, primly. "You never did work out what the badge would look like for the 'Special Investigators'. Or the authorization."

"Oh, shoot! Well, what about the Home logo?" asked Taylor.

"Maybe. If we could get ALL the countries to recognize it. But I don't see that happening right away. Nope. This is specifically for Britain," Muriel replied. "Home would be acting ON BEHALF of Britain, and under British authorization, but using Home techniques where necessary," Muriel said. "No, I was thinking more of the 'star-burst' badge with the crown at the top – the new one, not the old one. The text 'SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR' in the circle, and in the center the TR. At the bottom, put the Home logo, if you like. We'd put it on your 'Wild West' blue hat, and change the tunics to the same blue, too, if you want," she added, and sent him an image of what it would look like.

"That's wicked! Put it up on screen, if you can, so Ralph can see it," Taylor said, grinning. Muriel quickly put it in her computer. It showed up on screen, and Ralph gasped.

"You're talking about making me a policeman?" he asked.

"Well, actually, an Investigator. To be specific, a Crown Special Investigator. And yes, you'd have the power to arrest. We need people to do special investigations, such as for companies . . . or banks," Taylor said. "You'd be working for Muriel, and under her authority. But you'd be using procedures of the area that you happen to be in at the time. If you need warrants, then come to me and I'll see to it. Muriel will give you the procedures that Commissioner Smythe gave her. And Muriel, I apologize. I'll get your authorization and a blank for your identification, so you can authorize anyone you need."

Chapter 6

The Investigations Begin

(Thursday morning)

“Morning, Ralph,” Muriel said. “Taylor get you all set up with an office?”

“Yes. He said to get with you for the squads. Oh, and he said to make it five of them. It's immense! Most of it seems to be a lounge of some sort,” Ralph said.

“Good reason for that. Envoys don't sleep. But they benefit from down time, just like humans do. That's where they'll stay at night, unless you have a need for them. And no problem. If I know my security chief, she's already got them lined up and waiting for you,” Muriel said, then started laughing. “Like, right outside.” Ralph turned around and stared at the ranks of five squads, squad leaders in the front and with one other Envoy forward of that. Mata just grinned.

“They've had all the courses, Ralph,” Mata said. “We took care of that last night. And I talked to Taylor about differencing them from you and Muriel, and he agreed. Their badges read 'SPECIAL INVESTIGATION SQUAD' and are silver rather than gold.”

“By the way, how's Millie doing with the new training?” asked Muriel

“Oh, her,” Ralph said, laughing. “The only reason we don't need more closet space is because everything she makes is shields. She's now got riding outfits that would shame any of the upper-crust at the stables. And I really don't know what the rest of them are.”

“Well, go get to know your security chief and your squads. They'll do most of the work for you. Basically, what you'll be doing is overseeing what they're doing, and making suggestions. Oh, and initiating new investigations, as needed,” Muriel said. “With everything else we gave you, last night, we gave you the banking laws for this country. You shouldn't have any trouble.”

“And your computers have the same information that we have on the banking system in this country,” Mata said. “And your squads are sorted out as to their functions. You should be able to be up and running in minutes. If there's anything you don't have, and need, let me know. Or let your security chief know. Really, he can probably get it for you faster.”

“This is unreal!” Ralph said. “I've NEVER seen things set up this fast. I expected at least a month of trying to figure things out!”

“Not going to happen,” Muriel said, laughing. “Envoys have had nine years of trying to keep up with me. It's gotten to be a contest as to whether I come up with something first, or they have the solution in place first. Now, we've got three banks and a Private Equity firm that look a little gray. So much so that Taylor is wondering where all the money is coming from and going to. Your analysis team can look for communications chains, and your on-duty

squad can go over financials. That'll give you time to talk to your security chief and get to know him – well. And he can brief you on what to do with all the evidence you collect, and what of it is valuable, and what of it is admissible in a British court. If you see something really nasty, and have enough evidence, pass it past me or Taylor, and we'll see if it's warrant-able. If it is, you'll have them and the manpower to lock the place down and retrieve all the records, and have the people arrested. Use the Mets for that. Let them make the actual arrests. And, before you ask, yes, I'm going to hold your hand for a while in this. Once you've seen how a couple of actions go down, you'll probably be left on your own except for reports. I won't do your job, but I'll help you find out how to do it, and help where-ever I can. Make sense?"

"Yea. With the speed this has been thrown together it make a LOT of sense," Ralph said. "What about these reports? Paper?"

"Nope. You drop by and talk to me. The reason is that there may be discussion concerning any stream you come up with," Muriel said. "We may hold an action because something else is in the wind. Maybe something completely unrelated. Or, it may not pass the 'sniff test' of my lawyer. She's good, and she believes in building 'slam dunk' cases. If she says that you don't have enough to make it a sure thing, then we hold and dig harder. All you'll actually be doing is keeping me informed of what's going on and how you're working. Ninety percent of the time I'll just let it run. It's that ten percent that can make us look bad," she added, smiling.

"Right! Then let me get out of your way and see what I'm up against," Ralph said, and left.

"Want to hear something funny?" asked Mata, after he'd left. "One of his squads," she went on without waiting for an answer, "was on security detail for him last night, and followed him in this morning. He came in in uniform. By bus. He stepped on board and handed the shocked driver his fare, then turned to find a seat. And the entire bus shut up and looked shocked. Some guy offered him his seat, and Ralph just smiled and shook his head, then rode in holding onto the standee's bar. He gets to the gate, touches his hat to the other passengers, and disembarks. And the guard at the gate just grins at him and opens it for him. And saluted." By the time Mata was through, Muriel was curled up, laughing.

"It must be the hat," Mata added, which didn't help Muriel at all.

When Muriel had finally regained herself, she asked, "Doesn't he know that he can just translate in?"

"SURE he does," Mata said. "But think. This is going to get around. I expect that by the end of the week, London is going to know that 'there's a new sheriff in town'."

"Oh, my!" Muriel said. "Yea, I guess so. And, from what you say, they're going to know that he's polite and friendly."

"Yep. That's my scan on it," Mata said. "They're also going to know that he's

unarmed.”

“Now, THAT could be a problem. He'll end up making a target of himself,” Muriel said.

“He's the first with the new badges,” Mata said. “I wonder if we need to get people out to change the old ones to Taylor. You know, put the TR in the center.”

“Might be a good idea. I'll talk to Smythe about it.” Muriel pulled out her phone and made the call. She got a secretary, and introduced herself as Muriel White. And the secretary promptly told her that she wouldn't be put through because she wasn't on the list.

“Mata, I think I'd like to have Nancy and Squad Three. Oh, and you. We're going to pay a call to the Yard. I couldn't reach the Commissioner, because I'm 'not on the list',” she said.

“Uh, huh. I'll let Janice know you're out of the office teaching manners to the impolite . . . again,” Mata said, chuckling. Muriel just grinned, and put on the Special Investigator uniform WITH the hat.

“Might as well make an impression,” she said. Mata laugh and joined her. As did the squad.

And in Scotland Yard, a bell rang, announcing the arrival of Muriel, Mata and the squad, much to the shock of the secretary that she'd just had on the phone. “Good morning,” Muriel said. “My name is Muriel White. Now, usually, I don't use my last name. I'm better known as Muriel, the Leader of Home, the Ambassador to earth, the Chancellor of the University of Home, the Marshal of the Forces of Home and, oh yea, the Crown Special Investigator. Oh, and I happen to be a Duchess and the consort to your King. And I'd like to see Commissioner Smythe. I suggest that you see to it.”

“Muriel?” asked the Commissioner, coming out of his office, drawn by the sound of the bell. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I called to see if you wanted some help changing the badges over to reflect Taylor. You know, with the TR in the center of the sun-burst,” Muriel said. “But I seemed to have some difficulty getting past your secretary.”

“Missus Robinson?” asked Smythe

“She's not on the list, sir,” she replied.

“Really? May I see your list?” he asked. She handed him a piece of paper. “Uh, huh. This is dated two years ago. Where's the list I gave you two days ago?”

“Well, really, sir,” she said, “the list never changes.” And she hunted around her desk for a minute, and finally came up with it in the bottom of her in-box.

"Well, let's just see what we have, here," Smythe said, going down through the list, then pointing to an entry that said 'Muriel White' and was followed by all the titles. "Ah, yes. Here it is. Just as I thought. I KNEW I'd typed this up for you. Just as I knew I'd typed one up for you three months ago, and another six months before that. Really, Missus Robinson, I DO have a reason for typing these, you know. And now I understand why I've been missing calls. Ambassador Muriel, I apologize. Missus Robinson, we will be talking about this, later."

"Oops," Mata said, sotto voce. Muriel just elbowed her in the ribs.

"Now, I must say that I like the uniform. Very distinctive," Smythe said, and Muriel had a hunch where this was going and warned Mata and the squad, mentally. "But was there a reason why you chose that rather than your regular one?" And Mata and the squad took two steps back.

"Well, I could have come in in utilities," she said, switching, "Or my Class A uniform," and she switched again, "or even my 'Fighting Formals', and switched a third time. Or, I could even have appeared like this," and grew to ceiling height, glowed, and grew wings. "But," she said, resuming the Special Investigator uniform, "since this was purely a British function, I thought this might be better. And Mata, you might as well put that feather away. I am NOT feeling a bit down, and you aren't going to get back at me for pulling that on you nine years ago. Besides, that one is a turkey feather," she added, without even bothering to turn and look. And the Commissioner had a hard time keeping from laughing.

"WAIT A MINUTE! Mata, are you calling me a turkey?" asked Muriel, turning around and with her hand on her hips. "You've been holding that gag for NINE YEARS hoping for a chance to use it?" And that did it. The commissioner busted up laughing. Mata just grinned.

"W-W-What was THAT!" stammered the secretary.

"Oh, just Muriel showing off," Mata said, coming forward. "She does that, every once in a while. Comes from being so young and female. Unlike me, that's male and MUCH older," Mata said as Matthew. "About 600 million years, as close as we can tell."

"W-W-What ARE you?"

"Envoy. She's human, and a mere infant," Mata said, resuming her normal appearance and smiling. "And you can blame her for me. I taught her the Envoy techniques. Then she re-taught them to me. She's also been teaching me human techniques. Like how to be outrageous."

"Anyway," Muriel said, in a vain attempt to regain control of the conversation, "If you'd like, I can teach your commanders how to make the change, and they can see to it, themselves. I believe you said they were all trained."

"Yes, yes. Of course," Smythe said. "Any time that's convenient to you."

"Well, I'm here," Muriel said. "And that way they wouldn't be out of the office for very

long. At least the ones on day shift. The rest can be trained by the commanders as they're relieved of duty."

"Good point. Why don't we go to the conference room, and I'll call them in," Smythe said. It only took a few minutes to teach the commanders how to create the new badges, and it was a bunch of very smiling people that left the conference room.

"Commissioner, I apologize for the disturbance, this morning," Muriel started.

"None necessary, m'dear," he said. "And actually, from what I've heard of you, you handled that very gently. I inherited Missus Robinson from the previous Commissioner. I'm afraid that she's gotten a bit set in her ways. Needless to say, you ARE on the list, and I don't think she'll make that mistake again."

"Well, I just thought it would be rude of me to just barge in on you," Muriel replied. "I really just wanted to set up a time with you to make the changes in the badges. Had she just said you were busy, I'd have asked her to have you call me back. But to simply be told that 'I wasn't on the list', as if I were of no account at all . . . well, it kinda disturbed me."

"Quite right, Muriel. Even your title as a Duchess or as a Special Investigator probably wouldn't have gotten you through. And it's doubtful that I would have even gotten a message that you'd called," he said. "This will change, one way or another, I assure you. I've had others say that they had trouble getting through to me, but this is the first time that I got hard evidence of it. The previous Commissioner only took calls from his cronies. Everyone else was expected to go through the front desk. Now, I wonder how many important calls I didn't get simply because the people weren't 'on the list'. Do you know that Taylor isn't even 'on her list'?"

"I can believe it," Muriel said. "And he's just as apt to call you as I would. Both of us believe at starting at the top, and letting the top give the orders to those underneath. For one thing, it avoids the problem of procedural errors. With you, we can ask 'how is the best way of doing this?' But with even commanders, they'd need to go through you, anyway, and things could get garbled."

"Good point!" Smythe said. "Do you know? Missus Robinson doesn't even have the training! It's no wonder she didn't know who you were. You're famous, you know."

"Oh, gad! That's all I need. Known, yes. Famous, though, leads to all sorts of rumor about what I'm actually like," Muriel said. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to get people to understand that the rumors are wrong? It's bad enough that I'm outrageous. But the way people slant it is that I'm apt to go off half-cocked without notice. And that's only partly correct."

"Do you get much of that?" asked Smythe.

"Enough to make me want to strike out at the perpetrators," Muriel said. "I usually contain my feelings, unless it's actually harmful. Then, I start publishing hard evidence. That

usually makes them look foolish, and squelches it for a while. I've got my 'diplomatic' squad coming up with a web site, so we don't have to rely on the media to do the publishing, though that will always remain a possibility. Particularly where the media outlet asks questions instead of making innuendos."

"Sounds like I'm glad I'm just a commissioner, instead of the leader of a country or Ambassador," he said.

"Yep. Feel fortunate. But if you ever do need something that way, holler, and we'll show you how we do it," Muriel grinned. "I've got to get back, now."

"Very good. And thank you for helping us out with the badges. The commercial company that usually makes them wanted to up their prices, outrageously," Smythe said. "It would have taken us another three months to raise the funds. And that by trimming services." He raised his hand in a half salute, and she and her squad translated out.

Chapter 7

Much Ado About Nothing

(Thursday afternoon)

::Muriel,:: Jeff sent, ::can I stash someone with you?::

::Sure. Problems?:: she sent back.

::I think so. Ted's picking her up, now,:: he replied.

::I'm coming in,:: she instantly said. ::Where do you want me to meet you?::

::In front of your old office, I guess,:: he said.

“Mata, squad three. Jeff has a problem,” Muriel said, and moments later they translated out, wearing Class A uniforms and the gray hats.

“Whoa! Slow down,” Jeff said, meeting them. “They're all right. This was someone that had come to meet and talk with me about some programming. Ted was showing her around, in civilian clothes because I was tied up for a bit. They were snatched and put in the back of a military style truck. No guard inside. We're just waiting for Henry to get a handle on who these people are, and Ted will translate them back here. They're using the old mental scramblers, and Ted's got her under his shields. And that trick you suggested, five years ago, really works. The shields immediately recognized the disturbance, and neutralized it, so they're not affected.”

“WHOOSH! Take a breath. OK, I'll wait for Ted, then translate her directly to my office,” Muriel said. “I can set something up, there, to house her until she's safe. Do we need to contact her boss?”

“As soon as we know who it is,” Jeff said. “They were snatched before I could find out anything.”

“OK, I'll alert Taylor and ask him if he'll mind having a house-guest. Mata, I think she'll need a squad, just in case,” Muriel said.

“Already on it. They should be ready as soon as Ted translates them back,” Mata replied, matter-of-factly.

“And here they come, now,” Jeff said. “Ted, Muriel's going to take her.”

“Oh, good,” he grinned. “I was at a loss for anything to say. Every time she opened her mouth, programming came out. I haven't felt so out of my depth since the time that Muriel trained twelve kids and an Envoy all at once.” Muriel just grinned at him.

"Are you all right?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, sure," Ted replied.

"I was talking about the young lady," Muriel said. "You couldn't be hurt by a nuclear bomb."

"How about that," Ted said. "Muriel's more destructive than a nuclear bomb."

"Are you implying that I hurt you?" asked Muriel, while the woman's eyes grew bigger, and went back and forth between Ted and Muriel.

"Well, you broke my heart," Ted said. "You had a crush on me and threw me over without my even knowing about it," he added, grinning larger.

"Aw! Poor baby. I'll have Bart fix your bottle for you," she shot back.

"As long as it's the one from Tennessee," Ted said.

"Lush," Muriel said, primly.

"Slave driver," he shot back.

"Infernal pest."

"Overbearing boss," Ted replied, and the woman started laughing.

"THAT'S what I was waiting for," Muriel shouted. "Thanks, Ted. OK, young lady. My name is Muriel. I'm the Leader of Home, and a bunch of other silly titles. I also happen to be the consort to the King of Britain, and have my office in the Palace. And that's where we're going, to get you out of the line of fire. Jeff? Are you coming, too?"

"Darned tootin' I am!" he said. "Carla knows, and the guys are happily ensconced in their work. I want to find out what this lady wanted to know, and who was after her."

"Well, quit dragging your feet, then. Let's go," Muriel said, and translated the bunch to her office.

"Welcome to Britain. Take a seat," she said, pointing to the casual area. "Then you can tell us who you are."

"OH! I'm sorry, Madam Ambassador. I'm Francine Franklin. My friends just call me Frankie," she said.

"Well, Frankie, I'm just Muriel. And that's a fast pickup. I don't believe I told you I was an Ambassador. So, you had to have picked it up off the window of my old office," Muriel said, grinning.

"I'm afraid that's my father's fault. He was trained in the military to know what was going on around him, before I was born," Frankie said. "He used to drill me in that, right up until I graduated high school. Do ALL of you have only first names?"

"Nope. All of the friends and I have last names. Mine is White, but I don't use it professionally, even though it's what's on my passport," Muriel said, pulling it out and showing her. "Jeff's full name is Jeffery Williams. But he does the same as I do. First names are friendlier, and if he has to resort to titles, it puts a further distance between him and who he's firing," she added, grinning.

"Well, you've certainly got an impressive office, here. And all those certificates? All PhDs?" Frankie asked.

"Yep. University of Home," Muriel said. "They're"

"Muriel, Ted just sent this to you. You can quit masquerading around, now. Melanie managed to get the treaty amended. Oh, and she said that the other countries with Enclaves are falling in line with it," Taylor said, translating in. "Oh, I DO beg your pardon. I didn't realize you were busy."

"No sweat, Taylor. This is Francine Franklin, better known as Frankie," Muriel said. "A bit of trouble when she was trying to get with Jeff about some programming. Ted's covering it with Henry, now. And this! This helps, though we may leave Ralph under the British badge."

"Works for me. You want him to still report to you?" Taylor asked, then looked over at Frankie, whose eyes had widened again. And she looked flustered, like she didn't know how to act. "You. Sit. Stay," he said, adding the hand signs one uses with a dog. "I'm only a King. MURIEL'S the ranking party, here. She's Leader of a whole world," he said, laughing. "I'm glad to know you, Frankie, and sorry you had a bit of trouble. Trust me, Muriel and Ted will straighten it out."

"Yes, I think so. Or, well actually, report to both of us. Now, as I was saying, Frankie," Muriel said, "the courses from the University of Home are freely available to anyone with the training. And since you have it, that means you, too. So if there's anything you want, even just to brush up on, let us know and we'll give it to you."

"Well, basically, I wanted to know what the APIs were for Jeff's operating system on his computers. The company I work for wants to port some of the games over to it, but there's no documentation!" she said, when she could catch her breath in the rarefied atmosphere of being in the presence of a King.

"That's because there isn't an operating system, as you know it," Jeff said. "The computers are made out of shields. Likewise the tablets and phones. And the latest ones all work the same way. It doesn't matter what operating system a program is written for. Tell the computer to install it, and it figures out what's needed. Tell the computer to run it, and it'll run faster than any standard computer, unless you put timers in it to keep it from going too fast.

And it doesn't need joysticks or special input devices for those with training. Just mental commands.”

“Not possible. ALL programs need an operating system,” Frankie said.

“Actually,” Jeff said, “that's not true. The computer just has to know what to do. And these are made of shields, which are semi-intelligent. You have one of our phones, don't you? Well, actually, before we even get to that, you've got a personal shield. Just reach to it like you were going to give it some direction. Go deep. And say 'hi'.”

“Say 'hi'!” she said. “I'd feel foolish.”

“Try it. I guarantee that you won't feel foolish after you do it,” Jeff said. “It's something that Muriel discovered a while back. I thought everybody that was taught shields knew about this. Go ahead. This isn't some sort of elaborate practical joke.”

“Well . . . OK. But if you laugh . . . ,” her comment was cut off by an incredulous look on her face. “Oh, my GOSH! It giggled, and I could swear that it snuggled up to me without drawing in. And I get the feeling that NOTHING that could hurt me would be let through.”

“Yep,” Jeff said. “Semi-intelligent. Now, do it with your phone.” It took a couple of minutes, then she looked at Jeff strangely.

“You weren't kidding. It asked me what I'd like to do. Not in words, but it was there,” she said.

“OK, now, do you have something that's on paper, and not on your computer?” asked Muriel.

“Yea. I came away without it. But if I'm going to be in Britain, then maybe I need it. At least to show Jeff why we were bugged. It's kind of a flow chart that shows where things seemed to break down,” Frankie said.

“OK, tell it to go get that flow chart and the program you're working on,” Jeff said. “Then ask it to look at the problem area in the program that's shown in the flow chart.”

Frankie looked at the phone for a minute, then said, “Oh, my. It went directly to the problem area, and highlighted where the problem was. It even suggested a solution.”

“OK, this is going to sound strange, but accept the solution, then tell the phone to debug the program, save it, then optimize it for use on one of my computers by an Envoy trained person,” Jeff said. “And save that under a different name. Standard 'configure, make, and make install.” She looked at him, shocked, then did it. When she looked back up at him, she had tears in her eyes.

“It did it. Faster than I've ever seen a program optimized and compiled. But I don't have a compiler on this phone. Do I?” she asked.

"You do, now. Don't worry about it. That phone IS a computer," Jeff said. "Now, tell it to run the program, and control it with your mind. It's a game, isn't it?"

"Yea. A first person shooter, single or multi-player," she said. "Oh . . . wow. Oh, I've got to send this to the guys!" she added.

"Go ahead. It'll connect to whoever you want to connect to. You're on our plan, aren't you?" he asked.

"I guess so. I only just got the phone a few days ago," she said.

"Hmm. I'll have to talk to the distributors, then. This all should have been explained to you, then. The phone is nothing but layers of shields that are, themselves, a shield. And it's semi-intelligent. More so than your personal shield," Jeff said. "It's got the same capabilities as your desktop computer. That is, if it's one of ours. We used to run two operating systems on the earlier ones, until we realized that the phone didn't need them. And for trained people, they do even more."

"There's a company in Japan. They've been trying to beat us in developing this type of game. Basically, it's a variation on paint-ball, but set up like a battle scenario. Hold on. Mike! Mike, shut up! I've got it. It's solved. Are you by your computer? OK, then hang on, and I'll send it to you. Got it? Just tell your computer to run it, then THINK what you want it to do," she said. After a minute, she turned to Jeff and said, "I think he fainted. I heard a crash, and he's not saying anything."

"On it," Mata said. "OK, one of Ted's squads went. He's all right. Give him a minute while they get him back up and stabilized, and he should be back on the phone."

"Mike? You OK, Mike? Stop babbling, Mike. They're Envoys. They came because one of the Envoys here, in Britain . . . YES, I'm in Britain, now shut up! She realized you were in trouble, and had one of Ambassador Ted's squads come to check on you. Thank them, nicely, Mike. Look, I'm here with the guy that invented those computers. He's also a programmer. Yes. Mike, SHUT. UP. Listen to me. We were wrong. So are the Japanese. But WE'VE got the FIX. I sent you the original code, fixed and debugged, but just as source code. And I sent you the optimized source code for the Triple E Computers, phones"

"Tablets," Jeff said.

" . . . and tablets. YES! It runs on my PHONE. They're all built the same way. The PHONE found the problem, suggested a solution, implemented it and debugged it. I saved that out, then had it optimize it for Jeff's equipment. It did, and compiled it, and I put them under different names. Take the optimized source code and take a look. You'll see what it did. Look, I've got to go. We can talk when I get back. OK. Yea, bye."

She sat back, and her hands dropped into her lap. Chuck came in with a familiar red can and a glass. She ignored the glass and drank the cola directly from the can. Almost

chugging it. When the can was empty, she looked up at Chuck and said, "Thank you. I don't even know your name, but thanks. I needed that. That's got to be the weirdest phone call I've ever made."

"Before you panic over the long distance charges," Muriel said, "there aren't any. I checked with the Triple E office in America. You bought the phone and plan from them. Well, one of their distributors. Because of the nature of the phones, they don't use the same connections that regular phones use. So, all there was was the cost of the phone, and the connection charge. And the connection charge was simply to cover the cost of disengaging you from your previous phone company. That's it. Unlimited calls, anywhere in the world. No 'air time', no long distance charges, no data plan. Nothing."

"And, if you let us know when you want a new phone – we upgrade about every year – that's covered under the upgrade clause. You get it free," Jeff said. "Oh, and do you have one of our tablets?"

"Um, no. I couldn't see the added expense," she replied.

"Well, I guess this would constitute an Enclave. It's certainly an Embassy," Jeff said. "Isn't it, Muriel?"

"For the purposes you're thinking of, yes," Muriel said.

"Good. Then, because you're in an Enclave, I can just give this to you at no charge," Jeff said.

"WHAT!"

"Yep. No charge. ANY Envoy trained individual isn't charged for whatever they need or want in an Enclave. Muriel's rules. Blame her," he said, laughing.

"Oh, my. GAD! I'm saying that a lot, here," Frankie said.

"Now you know where to go to get things," Muriel laughed. "Beats the prices out in the real world."

"Now, just say 'hi' to it. That'll lock it to you. Then think of your phone and computer," Jeff said.

A moment later, Frankie said, "It's all here! Everything!"

"Yep. And it's synchronized. What you do here will also be on your computer and phone. The tablet just makes it easier to work on when you're out of your office. The screen on the phone is a bit small for some things," Jeff said.

"Oh, Mike is NOT going to believe this!" Frankie exclaimed.

"That's what happens when you go to the source," Jeff punned.

"Can the guys in the office get these?" asked Frankie.

"Sure. Just have them come out to the American Enclave, and come to my office. Reception will show you how to find it," Jeff said.

"Now, young lady," Taylor said, "if you're ready, I can take you to your apartment, until Muriel can get whatever the problem was cleaned up."

"You . . . ?" she asked.

"Why not? I've been knocking around the old barn since I was born. And I know where Saul set you up. There'll be a squad to take care of your needs, and they know where everything is," Taylor said. "Yes Mata," he added, looking at her, "I checked. They're all female." Mata just grinned. "Anything you need, just ask one of them. I'm afraid we can't let you out of the Palace grounds until things have settled down. But that shouldn't be more than a couple of days. But, in the mean time, you can always bug Muriel, and she can teach you the tricks of how she manages things." He stood up and offered her his hand. She took it, and they translated out.

"Jeff, thanks for coming and helping out," Muriel said, quietly.

"Hey, my job!" he replied. "And, she'd come to see me, originally, anyway. It just had to be here instead of my office. So, thank you for inviting her, and allowing me to tag along and do my job." Muriel stuck her tongue out at him and they both grinned.

Chapter 8

Nothing Much About the Ado

(Friday morning)

::Ted, any information on that crew that picked you and Frankie up?: Muriel sent.

::Frankie, huh? I knew her as Francine. But yea, we got them. Japanese industrial espionage. We ended up turning them over to the Japanese police under abduction and treaty violations. Looks like the company will get sanctioned for the action, since they authorized it. Could cost them millions,:: Ted sent back. ::Any time you want to turn her loose, feel free. Oh, Jeff told me what it was all about. Laughing the whole time. She'd never been trained to use her phone and computer as a trained person. But, you've got her, and if you want to give her the 'British experience', feel free::

::I may do that. A lot depends on her. Right now, she holed up with a warm tablet, going over things with some of the crew she works with, explaining how to do things,:: Muriel sent with a grin. ::I expect I'll see her in about a half hour or so. Then we can decide what we're doing::

::Well, good luck with that,:: Ted sent back. ::She may want to come back here and hit the shops. WE don't charge for merchandise::

::Yea, well if she gets it in my office, she doesn't pay, either, smarty,:: she sent back. "What's on for today, Mata?"

"Got a nibble on one of the banks that Ralph is investigating. He ran some figures from their financial, and they didn't add up right. So he checked ALL their financials. They're rounding their figures on interest to their customers. You know, where it's fractions of a cent. Rounding them down, and collecting the change. It doesn't sound like much, but that's just one branch," Mata said. "So, he checked the others. They're all doing it. It's the main computer in the main office that's actually doing it. He'll probably be in to see you, later. He said he wanted to run the other two banks, too. Because that money's going somewhere, and it isn't showing up on their ledger sheets. A couple of Nancy's people are up there showing him how to search for records that aren't in computers."

"THAT was fast," Muriel said.

"It's the bank that he used to work for. And part of the reason that he left them. Things just didn't look right," Mata said. "Have you come up with the 'international' badge, yet?"

"Working on it. Basically, concentric gold circles with the words 'SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR' spelled out in red on a white background, and the Home logo in the center," Muriel said.

"Make it silver for the Envoys," Mata said. "And SPECIAL INVESTIGATION SQUAD."

You're the officer. We're the grunts."

"Stool softener will take care of that," Muriel said.

"Only YOU would think of that," Mata said, grinning.

"Hey, somebody's got to think around here," Muriel replied, primly.

"Yea, that's why we Envoys do it," Mata retorted.

"Is this a closed session, or can anybody pun in?" asked Frankie.

"Why? You got a good one?" asked Muriel.

"Well, I just thought I knew where the conversation was bound, but then I realized that it was just a lot of sewer gas," Frankie replied.

"OK, you're in. Double puns on a string joke. You'll do," Muriel said.

"Oh, heck, this is the way it is all the time in the bull pen," Frankie said. "One of the reasons I use Frankie rather than Francine is because then they think of me as a guy, and don't try to sanitize their language. Tensions get high, and this stuff flies all over the room."

"It's really propelled through the oscillating device for the rapid movement of air, huh?" asked Muriel.

"Well, that too if the distribution bosses catch us. Then it REALLY hits the fan," Frankie said, laughing. "What's worse is when we get into programming jokes. We can run those all day, and those bosses don't catch on. They think we're just talking about programs we're working on."

"Do they know that you're trained?" asked Mata.

"I don't think they care," Frankie replied. "They just want the code out. And yes, all the programmers are trained. That's what I was doing this morning was updating them on what they could do with the computers. They've got two more programs cleaned up and optimized for Jeff's computers, now."

"GOOD FOR YOU!" Muriel said. "By the way, Jeff checked, and your company is one that accepted our help, and our nominal cost for the patents and copyrights. They may not have told you that."

"They didn't. That's why I came out to talk to him," she said.

"Yea, he left a note on my desk before I came to work this morning. He must have dropped it off last night, after I left. Seven hour difference. Afternoon there is evening here," Muriel said. "He'd checked before you got there, simply because you'd called and said you

were on your way. By the way, how would you like to have him as a boss?"

"I don't know. I kinda like the work I do, now," Frankie said.

"That's OK, you wouldn't be changing jobs or locations. I'll just see about buying the company and putting Jeff in charge. Fire upper management and put in Envoys, at least temporarily. Then check middle management and replace as necessary. You people wouldn't have to worry," Muriel added. "With the training, you HAVE to be honest. You'd still have the same jobs, but the benefits and pay are better."

"You're kidding! You can do that?" asked Frankie.

"Frequently. It might take a little time, but it's a possibility," Muriel replied.

"OK, for something like that, I'd have to talk to the guys. You're not going to believe this, but WE own the company," Frankie said. "We just needed businessmen to run it. Of course, those businessmen appear to be a little out of control, right now. And every time we release something, it seems that it's similar to something that somebody else just released."

"OK, call your guys and tell them not to release anything more for a bit. I want to look into the company and see what's happening," Muriel said. "I've heard of this sort of thing happening. Give me the names of the software you've already put out. I think I know what's happening. And, whatever you do, DON'T let your businessmen know that you solved your problem."

"Well, all right. What are you going to do?" asked Frankie.

"Mata?"

"On it. Frederica says that the company is questionable, and has passed it to the lawyers. Hold on," Mata said. "OH! OK, the lawyers have been looking at it for a while. Seems the names of the top of Frankie's company are also listed as being part of a patent and copyright troll. As a matter of fact, the same troll that's started lawsuits against her company. Oh, my! OK, Henry just rang in on it. One of the FBI sections has been looking into it, and is about to shut them down. Muriel, bring Frankie's programmer buddies in. They're going to need protection. I've got the on-duty squad running the financials, now."

"Frankie, tell your friends that they're going to have a short vacation. You're staying here. My squads will bring them in, and we'll put them up in a secure location. How many are there?" asked Muriel.

"Ten. And we own the equipment. The businessmen wanted us to sign it over to the company, but we didn't," she said.

"Good girl. Have them power down their equipment. OK, Mata, who's on deck?" asked Muriel.

"Betty's squad has the desks. You can take the other three. And me, of course," Mata said. "I've got a visual on what Frankie calls the 'bull pen'. We need a place to store the equipment, and you might need some help from Home. OH, Nancy's already made the request."

"Frankie, did you get ahold of them?" asked Muriel.

"Yep. One of the 'bosses' came in and wanted to know why they shut down. Mike told him it was a system failure, and they needed to wait ten minutes before rebooting. He's gone," Frankie said.

Muriel smiled, grimly. "OK, we bring the programmers here, and take the equipment to the training room of 'The Welcoming One'. Warn the manager, Betty. He'll be getting guests."

"On it. Oh, he says 'no problem', and he'll have his people set up the equipment for them in their rooms," Betty said.

"What's happening?" asked Ralph, as he came through the door.

"Ralph! Oh, Ralph, sorry. I'll be back in five or ten minutes," Muriel said. "Just stay put and I'll get to you when I get back. Honest." And she and the squads blinked out.

"JEEZ! What's happening?" he asked, again.

"I think Muriel's afraid that the company that some friends of mine and I started has been pirated by the people that were supposed to handle the business side of it," Frankie said. "She's gone to rescue my friends and their equipment. Oh, I'm Frankie. I'm a programmer. What's with the fancy duds?"

"I'm Ralph. Glad to meet you, Frankie. I'm a Crown Special Investigator working on banks and private equity firms," he said. "Just as an exercise, I started with the bank that I used to work for. Come to find out, they're dirty. A rounding down scam led me to some other irregularities, and I wanted to talk to Muriel about where to take this."

"Where is everyone?" Taylor asked, translating in.

"Good morning, sir. Frankie and I were just discussing that. Apparently, she went to rescue some programmers," Ralph said, standing up.

"Oh, Ralph. I see I've GOT to train you better," Taylor said, grinning. "Sit. So, what happened, Frankie?"

"Oh, she thinks the businessmen we put in to run the company have tried to take it over. She's pulling my friends out. And their equipment. She said something about a lawyers office working on something about patents and copyrights," she said. "But, I don't see how they can be taken away from us. They were never assigned to the company, and it wasn't work for hire."

"Alice?" Taylor said and sent.

"It's not me," she said, translating in. "Or at least not yet. It's the office in the American Enclave. Frankie, can you tell me a little about the way the company is set up?"

"Yea. My friends and I like to program, and we enjoy making games. We work together, and the copyrights are joint, between us. The company was set up to distribute the games. The copyrights aren't assigned to them, and we don't work for the company. They work for us," Frankie said. Alice just grinned.

"OK, based on past experience, I think what Muriel's doing is pulling your friends in and having them say three words," Alice said.

"What three?" asked Frankie

"I request asylum," Alice replied. "That puts you under the protection of Home. And she's bringing them out of the country for the same reason that she pulled you in. To keep you from being picked up by anybody in America, and keep your location secret. Are any of them married, or anything like that?"

"Nope. We were all in college together," Frankie said. "Never really had much time to do anything like that."

"GEEZ! WHAT THE HELL!" came a voice through the now open doors. They'd claimed ten victims at once

"Quite," came Muriel's voice. "No talking until you're inside. MOVE, people. I can't help you if you don't help me." Ten young men and women walked into her office, looking bewildered. "On the left. Find seats. Leave the two recliners in the corner. That's for the bosses. That's it. Good. Now, ONE AT A TIME, I want each of you to say three words. Nothing more. Not yet. Just say, 'I request asylum'." And she pointed from one to another until she'd gotten all of them, including Frankie.

"OK, NOW I'll tell you what it's all about," Muriel said. "My name is Muriel"

"Oh, shit! It's HER!" came a voice. Muriel just grinned.

"I see someone knows who I am. I'm the Leader of Home and Ambassador to earth, among other things," she said. "Frankie explained enough about what was going on, that we decided to pull you in and protect you. Oh, hi, Alice. You want in on this, too? Taylor, grab a seat." Another chorus of 'oh, shits' greeted that last name.

"I won't head it, but I might act as mouthpiece for the American office," Alice said. "No problem there. You got all the records?"

"Yep. Two companies. One is the programming side, and the other is the distribution

side,” Muriel said. “Distribution is trying to grab the copyrights under the theory that the programs were works for hire. They’re also part of a patent and copyright troll that’s fronting their effort. Ted’s crew is working on that, and he knows that the programmers are now protected and out of the country. Ted’s working on buying the distribution company. I understand that you people actually own it?”

“Unless they managed to find a way to take it away from us without telling us. They don’t know about the programming company,” Frankie said.

“Good. We’ll keep that quiet, for now,” Muriel said, grinning. “Now, do any of you have any problem with our taking over the distribution for a while?”

“What’s it going to cost us?” one of the men said.

“Nothing. In fact, you should make a profit from it,” Muriel said. “If what Ted is telling me is correct, anyway. It also gives us a foothold in that troll, so we can roll it up.”

“Roll it up?” asked a woman.

“Yea. This has the potential of exploding in their face with all sorts of criminal charges being placed against them,” Muriel said. “But when we spring those, we want the whole group at once, including the ‘silent partners’ that are driving it. I have an idea who they are, but we need proof. That’s why I wanted you protected. If absolutely necessary, we can shuttle you between any Home Enclave or Embassy to keep your location unknown.”

“Dar,” Frankie said, “I trust her. You have NO idea who these people are, I know. But I do. The guy sitting on Muriel’s left is Taylor, King of Britain and her consort. The guy beside me is a Crown Special Investigator. And I get the feeling that he’s nearly as important as she is. And yesterday I was talking to another Ambassador, Jeff. The guy that invented the computers that we’ve been using. I’m suggesting that we, as the officers of the distribution company, sign it over to them.”

“WHAT? Just like that?” asked another guy.

“Alice?” Muriel asked.

“I see where you’re going. OK, people. I’m a lawyer. One that TRIES to keep Muriel out of trouble. And this time, to do my job, I’ve got to try to get you folks out of trouble, too. No sweat. I’m in contact with the law office in America – part of the American Enclave – and in touch with Ted. What they propose is that we buy the distribution company from you, and put it under the control of the Envoy Enclave Enterprises. That means cash to you people. First thing that Muriel and Ted do is to fire the people you have in there and grab their records. Criminal charges could be brought against them, in your names, based in part on those records. At the same time, we get enough hard evidence to roll up the patent and copyright troll, and end any lawsuits that they have going. When the dust settles and there are people you can trust in charge of the day-to-day of the distribution company, we can sell it back to you, if you want. That can be written right into the bill of sale. All this does is give us

the power to act on your behalf.”

“And this is legal?” asked the one called Dar.

“Well, a bit dodgy,” Alice said, smiling. “But America says they can make it stick. Ted's already got the FBI working on the criminal aspects of this. We've got good relations with them. You're not going to be hurt by any of this, though it will mean some work on your part, and maybe some court appearances. Again, if we own the distribution company, then the American Enclave law office can represent you – at no charge, because you're trained and in and Enclave or Embassy. Muriel believes in protecting Citizens of Home. And I've checked. All of you are. She's on your side, which means that ALL the Enclaves are on your side.”

“OK, lunch, people. Talk it out amongst yourselves,” Muriel said. “My crew will take you to 'The Welcoming One' where you can have lunch and see your new rooms. Get in touch with that young lady at that desk – her name is Mata, and she's an Envoy – when you've come to a decision. Then, we can talk more or do whatever is necessary. OK?” And in short order, eleven people were translated out to Muriel's new building.

Chapter 9

The Artful Dodging (Friday afternoon)

“OK, Ralph. I think we'll have lunch, here,” Muriel said, “and you can fill me in on what's happening. Just tell Chuck what you want, then we can get started.”

Ralph did, then said, “What I found out was that the main offices of the bank I worked for are funding a couple of terrorist groups in Britain. We have names for where the money is going, but I don't have the names of the entire group, yet.”

“OK, that makes it a criminal action,” Taylor said. “But we do need the names.”

“I know. We're tracking emails and such right now. Those squads of mine are very efficient,” Ralph said. “I couldn't believe how fast they came up with the information. We're still trying to lay hands on hard evidence that would hold up in court, though. So, as much as I hate to say it, we have to wait.”

“Probable cause,” Alice chimed in. “If you can give us enough hard to get probable cause, we can shut down the banks and get more. That is, if the banks have the information.”

“I agree,” Ralph said. “And that's what my squads are working on, now. The trouble is, that if you do grab the banks, it may spook the terrorists into going into hiding. I'd rather get the whole group at once.”

“Good point. Any external links?” asked Muriel.

“Maybe. Kieth isn't sure. Oh,” Ralph said. “Kieth is the security chief of the group. He's got one squad looking into some questionable information that may lead that way. That's another reason to wait. If it IS international, then you may have to take further action further out. And again, it would be best if you could take them all down at once. I suggested that they look at financial information coming IN to the questionable ones, as well as emails and other contacts.”

“Good. Sounds like you've got it covered, and I agree with holding off until you've got more,” Muriel said. “We'll put a watch out for activity, to try to protect the innocents, if you can give us any names.”

“I've got them,” Mata said. “Nancy's squad is looking into that side of it for us.”

“Good. Very good,” Muriel said. “Taylor? Anything you can add?”

“Nope. We know what direction it's going in, and he's got it under control. So, Ralph can run with it as he sees fit,” Taylor said. “He knows how to get hold of us if he has questions, problems, or anything new comes up.”

"Yep. That's the way I see it. Ralph," she added to the man, "I apologize for not being here when you arrived."

"Oh, that's all right. You've got to do what you've got to do. Nothing on my side was that hot," he said. "And you weren't gone that long. In fact, it was fascinating watching you work. You really believe in being absolutely sure before you take action."

"I have to," Muriel replied. "For the sake of Home, the Enclaves, and the Citizens of Home. I mess up and governments could decide that I was being overbearing and dictatorial. It could start a fight that would end up with the destruction of earth."

"THAT'S why you want reports before you take any action on what I come up with!" he said.

"Yep. It isn't that I don't trust you, Ralph," she said with compassion. "It's just that this affects everyone. Perhaps more than you can know. And the way to avoid that trap is to talk to other people about what's going on and how you're dealing with it. And no, I'm not infallible. That's the reason that I talk to other people. Others can see possibilities that I might not. Come up with other possible solutions. Even come up with other questions that I hadn't considered. Taylor and I don't think alike. So, we cross-talk and make better decisions because of it."

"And I always thought that being a boss was easy," Ralph said.

"Oh, it can be, if you just relax and realize that you're not the only one with an idea," she said. "Of course, it also means picking people you can trust to talk to."

"OK, I'm convinced. I've been listening to Kieth and the others. I'll try to listen more closely. THEN, when I come to you, maybe I'll have more of the bases covered," he said.

"Yea. Envoys are good to talk to. They do have some blind spots, though. Remember," Muriel said, "that they don't have the human experience that you and I do."

"Yep. Got it. So, what can you do about Frankie and her friends?" Ralph asked.

"At the moment? Nothing, until I hear from Ted that he can grab the company. That's IF they go along with that. Otherwise . . . well . . . it would mean a court battle, and even more research into what happened and how. And it might mean that we couldn't roll up the trolls," Muriel said.

"There's a possibility that they're international," Taylor said. "The attempted grab on Frankie, along with her finding out that the bosses are trying to take over sounds a bit suspicious."

"Hmm. Good point," Mata said. "I'm passing that on to Nancy."

::Muriel,:: Frankie sent, ::could you come meet with us when you get an opportunity? We're in the restaurant in that strange building.::

::Right away,:: Muriel sent back. ::We just finished lunch. Mind if Taylor joins us?::

::That's fine, if we're not taking him away from something important,:: Frankie sent back.

"Mata?"

"I heard. From the concern in her voice, I'd say it might be an idea if Squad Three went with you, too," Mata said.

"Taylor?"

"I'm coming with you," he replied, grinning. "There's no telling what kind of trouble you're apt to get into." Muriel stuck her tongue out at him, and Ralph laughed.

"So? Let's go!" Muriel said.

As they translated into the restaurant, they saw that six tables had been put together for the group. Dishes were being collected by the staff, and Frankie had a small stack of papers in front of her. And Alice was there.

"I hope you don't mind, but I asked your lawyer to come take a look at these," Frankie said. "Mike printed them off for us. These are the contract we have with each other, and the paperwork setting up the distribution company. Oh, and the releases to distribute the games we came up with. The manager of the distribution company has tried, on a few occasions, to get us to sign other paperwork. But we told him, each time, that it wasn't his place to initiate stuff for us to sign. We have unsigned copies of those, too."

"Alice?"

"I've looked at them. Their contract with each other is solid. So is their corporate documents setting up the distribution company," Alice said. "As for the individual releases, it's ONLY for the distribution of the games. It doesn't transfer any copyrights. I don't like the look of the other paperwork, though. One of them was an application for employment. Another was an acknowledgment of having read and understood the employee's handbook. They never receive such a document prior to being asked to sign for it."

"Any chance they could try to fake their signatures onto such documents?" asked Muriel.

"Maybe. And that's a concern," Alice said.

"Maybe not as much as you think," Ralph said. "Sorry, I couldn't resist joining you. I worked for a bank, and one of the things we had to watch out for was various methods of

forging signatures. If they did it by having someone try to duplicate their signatures, then there would be variations that would show up that the real person wouldn't have had. Oh, all signatures vary some. I'm talking about alternate ways of writing letters, or loops where none should be, or no loops where there should be one. If they tried passing a photocopy off as the real thing, then there'd be no depression in the paper, and there might be signs of where they pasted in the signature from someplace else, or glitches in the signatures, themselves. Make them produce originals and not copies."

"Good point," Alice said. "I haven't worked with that sort of fraud, before. Thanks."

"Muriel, based on what you said, and what we see here, I think we need to sell you the company," Frankie said.

"Do all of you agree with that?" asked Muriel. A chorus of 'yeses' and head nods met that question. "OK, let me talk to Ted."

::Ted, what are the chances we can buy that distribution company of Frankie's?::

::Say the word, and I'll pull the trigger,:: he replied. ::Our lawyers have the paperwork, and can get it to Alice whenever she wants::

::OK, they want to do this. Can you get accounts for them set up in one of our banks, and Home backed cards for them?:: Muriel asked.

::Easily. Give me a couple of minutes. Alice already sent me their names. Have them sign the paperwork while I do this. Oh, and how do they want the distribution?:: he asked.

::I'll ask,:: she said. "Frankie, how do you want the funds distributed?"

"Oh, equal shares. GEEZ! I don't even know what the amount is! I'm getting old," she said.

"No, just flustered by events," Muriel said. "After the fifth or sixth time of having to deal with emergencies, it gets easier," she grinned.

"Yea, right," one of the guys said, while Alice wrote a figure on a piece of paper and put it in front of Frankie.

"That doesn't seem like much for the company," Frankie said.

"Each," said Alice.

"Oh, GEEZ! Guys, we're rich!" she said, shocked.

"Just sign the papers while Ted sets up the accounts and gets the cards issued to you," Muriel said. ::Ted, equal shares,:: Muriel said, and quoted the figure that each of them would get.

::OK, about five minutes,:: he replied.

"The cards will be here in about five minutes," Muriel said. "Think you can have the paperwork signed in that time?"

It actually took about ten minutes to sign the papers transferring the ownership to Home. The cards, when they came, were a light gray and had their name, card number and picture on the front along with the Home logo. On the back was a place for their signature and the typical magnetic strip. Along with the cards came the information that Ted and his squads were at the company offices, and had locked them down and retrieved the records. The managing director was all bluff and bluster, until Ted pulled a copy of the signed documents out of a 'no pocket' and showed him that Home now owned the company.

He translated in, shortly after. "OK, that's taken care of. Gang, the company will actually be managed by Triple E until you're ready to take it back. The price to buy it back will be about half what you got. So, you're not going to lose out anywhere along the line. If you decide to keep us as your managers, then we get two percent of the gross. We'll take care of packaging and distribution, and you can concentrate on doing what you like to do. You'll get regular reports on how the company's doing and what's selling. By the way, the records are interesting reading, according to my security chief."

"Oh?" asked Frankie.

"Yea. Apparently, there were a bunch of emails between the managing director and the other game company about taking over the company. And yes, they had forged documents in their records, along with all sorts of actions that were to be taken against you. I take it that the Japanese company wasn't too happy with your competition," Ted said. "It was the Japanese that wanted to take the action. It was the Japanese that wanted to buy the company and force you to work for them or not work at all."

"That could tie us up for years!" Mike said.

"Nope. Not your problem. It's ours," Ted said. "Oh, we'll let you know what's going on, of course. But since Home owns the company, it's Home that defends it. And we've got enough hard evidence to be able to put the perpetrators away for a long time. Not only that, but we're sending copies of the emails and such to the Japanese government – well, their police, anyway – with a strongly worded suggestion that the company that was involved be shut down. THEY were the ones that came up with the fraudulent concept of the director selling a company that he didn't own."

"So, until that company is dealt with," Muriel said, "you are our guests. This building, any Enclave, and my office are all safe places for you to be. If you need anything, your Envoys, here, will get it for you. If you leave, we can't protect you. I promise, when this is all over you'll be allowed to get out and look around."

"Muriel," Taylor said, "you missed one. ANYWHERE in the Palace is safe. I'm an

Ambassador, even if it's just to be a liaison with Home. So the grounds are actually an Embassy, under the Treaty Britain has with Home. They come and want to look around, no problem. And outside, on the grounds, they'd be guarded by the Regiment of Home. I've got a nice, big, backyard that you can walk around. Horses you can ride. Tennis court. Or you can just laze around on the lawn and soak up the sun – weather permitting.”

“YOU'VE got”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Muriel said. “I introduced him to Frankie. I thought we told you. This is His Majesty Taylor, King of Britain. The Palace is his home. Folks, you were sitting inside Buckingham Palace.”

“I don't believe this,” another one said. “I'm sitting here talking casually with the King of Britain!”

“And the Leader of Home and Ambassador to earth,” Taylor said, grinning. “She out-ranks me.” And that started the group chuckling. “You all know how to translate. And you've got Envoys in attendance on you to help if you're out of practice. You know what her office looks like from the outside. Feel free to drop by. I'll set it up with the Colonel of the Regiment to have extra guards available to show you around and keep you safe.”

Chapter 10

Of Things to Come

(Saturday morning)

"We basically experience things differently," she was saying. "We simply agree on what we experience."

"You're kidding!" Frankie said.

"Nope," Muriel replied. "What I see as blue and what you see as blue are very likely different. We can describe them as light at a certain wavelength, but that doesn't really explain the experience of seeing it. And there are various shades of blue, yet a wide range of them are simply called 'blue' by most people. Why? Because that's what we've been taught to agree on."

"Isn't that an oversimplification?" asked Frankie.

"Is it? Complex things are simply made up of simple things. But, as we learn to understand and experience more, those complex things become the building blocks for even more complex things," Muriel said. "How many different blues are in Thomas Gainsborough's 'Blue Boy' painting? Yet they give the effect of cloth of a particular type, and the effects of light and shadow as the scowling boy stands there. VERY complex, yet made of simple things. And not just shades of blue, but values – how light or dark they are. How shiny the material is. How thin and soft."

"And you say that that's what we do when we're programming," Frankie said. "Yea. I guess you're right. We take simple algorithms and turn them into complex structures to create action on screen and allow for the user to affect what goes on in the program."

"Yep. And the way you program is dependent on the programming language you use," Muriel said. "Jeff tried to teach me programming, one time. What I took away from the experience is that the language we use helps to define the experience we have. And that's what he's tried to eliminate. When we discovered that shields were semi-intelligent, and could be taught, everybody but him was dumbfounded. Him? He just took the information and started creating shields and seeing what they could do. And he discovered that programming them limited them. Just like lack of connections limited them, but in a different way. Lack of connections means lack of the ability to do more than a certain amount. But programming the shields limited them to ONLY the structure of the programming language."

"So, how do the phones know how to run programs, then, if they don't have the language?" asked Frankie.

"As near as I can tell, they do it by looking at the simple things. What is input. What is output. It literally analysis the program, very quickly, and finds out the syntax and order of operations and stuff. Then simply does it."

"That would have to be a very complex shield," Frankie said.

"It is," Muriel agreed. "VERY complex. It's a shield made of layers of shields. And each layer has cross connections within itself, as well as connections to shields above and below it. I saw a model of one in Jeff's office, one time. It was dense. And it reminded me of a space-scape that an Envoy had painted, that you could actually get inside and look around. And that scared me. The Envoy had modeled a galaxy. Jeff had modeled a set of layered shields and they looked the same. And I wondered if there were connections between the stars, and between the stars and planets. In other words, was the universe just a massive set of shields. Go to the art gallery in the American Enclave, sometime, and look at the space-scape. Then ask Jeff to show you that model and see what YOU think." Frankie just shivered.

"Is he going to go any further with the development of computers?" she finally asked.

"Only around the edges. Shape, size, things like that. He's afraid to make them more complex," Muriel said.

"Why?"

"He's afraid he'd make an Envoy. Or at least something that intelligent and sentient," Muriel said. "He won't go further until he understands more about Envoy minds and human minds. AND gets approval from Ted and I, and a bunch of other people, including Mata and Bart."

"So, how do you tell these computers to make use of their natural abilities?" asked Frankie.

"You'd have to ask Jeff. I THINK he does it. But beyond what we do with our personal shield and clothing, I don't really know," Muriel said. "But take a GOOD look at these walls, and tell me what you see. Walk around, looking at them."

Frankie did look. And got up and looked at the same spot from different directions. Then it hit her what Muriel wanted her to see. These were true three dimensional pictures. As she moved, she was seeing the same object – in this case a tree – from different points of view. And the background changed in relationship to where she was looking from. Then, as she watched, there was a movement in the trees. And a deer came down to the stream and drank. Frankie gasped, and the deer looked up – looked AT her – then bolted away.

She stumbled back to Muriel's casual area and collapsed on a seat. "Startling, isn't it. The walls are all one computer, and are tasked with nothing but representing this scene at different times of day, and different lighting. And, occasionally, an animal that actually reacts to people looking at it," Muriel said. "The one in Carla's office represents a book that we both read as kids. This, though, goes way beyond that. Hers is three dimensional, but still has a flat wall quality, unless she's changed it, now. THIS – you feel like you could walk into it. Carla, by the way, is Jeff's consort, and they share a building. Downstairs are their offices.

Upstairs are their apartments. Unless they've joined them now. Or, maybe they always were joined. I never asked."

"Did she do that sculpture in the place the guys are staying at?" asked Frankie.

"Nope. She did the building," Muriel said. "She's an architect, engineer, and designer – both interior and clothing and maybe other things. When she showed me the building, she said she wished she had a picture to put behind the reception desk. But she was hinting. I took the hint. It took images from nine people – nine points of view – and about an hour and a half to create it. And I was beat, afterwards."

Frankie moved over toward the wall next to Muriel's desk. "Twenty PhDs? You have twenty of them?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh. Yea. As things came up, I found that I needed more information on how to deal with them. So, I'd ask Betty for another course. We've had some strange situations go down. Some of them meant needing to have an idea of how people think. Others were the laws in America. I've got the British ones on Law too, now. Including the British Poly Sci ones, so I've got an idea of how the laws are created in this country. America's methods have changed, some, now. The basic method is the same, but the direction of the laws has changed. For about fifty years – maybe more – America was passing laws that only benefited businesses. That ended about five years ago, and Congress was put to the task of cleaning up the laws. No more 'riders' that simply served to pad some politician's political position. No more pork that just provided temporary jobs for a small area of a state. The President at the time made it plain that if the politicians wanted those, they'd have to go out and drum up the money to fund them, without taxing the people. Even if it meant paying for things out of their own pockets. "

"Politics used to be a career in America," Muriel added. "People with absolutely NO experience at living would get elected to office to tell other people how they were going to live. And some of them got away with murder – in some cases, literally. There were more scandals involving politicians, for a while, than there were scandals involving entertainers. Then people discovered that politicians were bought and paid for by businesses. And, about that time, the American Enclave was getting attacked more and more often. And I realized that I wasn't solving anything – that I was going around putting out fires, and more were springing up behind me. That's when the mass trainings started. And that was the beginning of the end for many of the politicians."

"My parents trained me," Frankie said. "I was fourteen or fifteen."

"You must have been one of the first 'wild' trainees, then," Muriel said.

"Yea. At first, I couldn't understand what they were doing. Why they were talking about power and shields," Frankie said. "Then we took a trip. There used to be a renaissance village, near where we lived. It used to take two hours to get to it. Dad took a back road, one day, and was there in five minutes. And I wanted to know how he did it. I got a better idea a few hours later. It seemed like there were a lot of kids there, that day. One,

walking with an older man, maybe her teacher, suddenly collapsed. And just as suddenly there were what looked like hundreds of kids standing around in gray uniforms. That was you, wasn't it?"

"Yea. I collapsed because I'd depleted myself trying to cover everything that was going on. Fran showed up and switched to whites, and just fed me power until I came out of it. I've handled more complex things since then. But that taught me to keep an eye on how much power I was drawing, and how much I needed at any time. I'm more apt to over power, now. Which causes comments, because then I glow," Muriel said, laughing.

"You glow?" asked Frankie.

"It's a minor thing. Anybody that's trained can do it," Muriel said. "There's other things you can do, too.

"You said that you modeled for that sculpture as well as made it. But it's huge. And it looks like wings on it," Frankie said.

"Yea. Come on outside for a minute. I want to show you something," Muriel said, and got up and headed for the door.

A very puzzled Frankie followed her out. As Muriel went through the door, she started growing until she was twice her normal size. Then she changed to her 'fighting formals' without the fly plaid, and turned and faced the girl. Suddenly, there were wings. Then the glowing started, until she was just an indistinct, glowing figure with wings.

"Showing off, again, eh?" Taylor said, walking up.

"She wanted to know about the sculpture in 'The Welcoming One'," Muriel said, collapsing back down to normal size and look. "I could have done this," she said, switching to the panther head and paws, "but it wouldn't have explained the sculpture."

"You like to shock people, don't you?" asked Frankie.

"Yea. It's a kid thing," Muriel grinned, now back to normal. "When you're twelve years old and leading a world that most people have never seen, or even considered actually exists, people tend to think you're making things up. So, you get outrageous. If they don't want to talk to you as an adult, you force them to acknowledge that you're, at least, more powerful. By the way, the first is real. The second – the panther head and paws – are simply shields. We never tried to monkey with the human body. And yea, you can glow, too, if you want. Just draw more power and it'll show up."

"And the wings?" asked Frankie.

"Ask your soul. It knows how," Muriel said. And Frankie looked to be deep in thought for a moment, then wings appeared. Muriel put up a mirror in front of her, and showed her.

"Oh, my," Frankie said. "It's real!"

"Yep. Envoy soul. And when you are really in contact with it, there's a lot you can do that you didn't think you could," Muriel said. "Just think. You can be as outrageous as I am." And that started Frankie laughing, but it wasn't hysterical laughter.

"So, was that what you wanted to find out?" asked Muriel.

"Yea. And more," Frankie said. "Muriel, what's it take to get degrees, like you've got?"

"Oh, that. Just a few minutes to have the courses passed to your soul. Then maybe a couple of days before you take the next batch, to allow you to be comfortable with them," Muriel said. "You have something in mind?" she added, leading them back to her office.

"I think I see what Jeff's trying to do. And it isn't that he wants to create an Envoy or something. He's looking at artificial intelligence. He's trying to compare it to how humans think," Frankie said.

"Yea, and how Envoys think. And no, he doesn't want to create Envoys. But he is looking for how to blend Envoy thinking with human thinking," Muriel said. "Not like it is in a human body, but as all one piece. I'm not explaining it right," she scowled.

"Maybe. But I get the point. Are there any courses on how the human brain works?" asked Frankie.

"Yes, and on artificial intelligence," Betty said, coming into the casual area. "Just pass these straight through to your soul," she added, and dumped two courses into the girl. "There are supplemental courses, too. But get used to these, first, so you know what direction you want to go in. Then come back and we'll give you more." And Frankie looked like she was in her own little world.

"Oh, I didn't tell you. I got an update of sorts from Ralph," Taylor said.

"What do you mean, 'of sorts'?"

"Oh, he came to me and asked about banking law. I got Saul to give him that and stock market regulations. I think I see what he's getting into," Taylor said. "Like America, everything is interlinked. Now, he's looking for the links, and how they're manipulated."

"Oh, GOOD for him!" Muriel said. "He's going just where I thought he'd go. And if he came to you, then he's feeling more relaxed – more secure with himself."

"Yes. That's kinda what I thought. Oh, I told him that I'd let you know, so you wouldn't need to be updated, directly," Taylor said.

"Yea. This is just information, and not something that needs direction or a decision, or something," Muriel said. "Your office?"

"Yep. Morning tea. I feel sorry for the banks. We've created a monster," Taylor grinned.

"And this is bad, how?" asked Muriel, laughing. "Really, this is what I was hoping for. A British attack dog for the financial industry."

"Well, you got it. And I think that his first attack is going to put the whole industry on notice that their behavior won't be tolerated any more," Taylor said. "He took the hint. He's holding back until he can roll the whole thing up. And he's acting more like the director than the investigator – letting his squad sort out the details and bring summaries to him."

"The way I work. I got roundly told off a couple of times for trying to do, myself, what others could do better. I learned," Muriel laughed. "The last time was Marcia, and she REALLY put me in my place. Taylor, I've got a question for you."

"Oh? Sounds serious," he said. "What's the question?"

"Does Britain still allow computer buying and selling on the stock market?" she asked.

"Hmm. Good question. I'll toss that past Ralph. Why?" he asked.

"Because that may be the way to untangle the banking mess," Muriel said. "If they're still using computers – whether or not it's legal – then Ralph may be able to get a handle on the mess by slowing them down. Banks and the stock market – and hedge funds and private equity firms – are all tied together, and it's the people that get hurt. They keep manipulating the market so they make money, but the money is actually coming from the people, themselves. They're killing the very source of their riches."

"That's a rather gloomy way of looking at it," Taylor said. "Why would they do that?"

"It's in their nature," Muriel replied, grimacing and referring to the scorpion and the frog.

Chapter 11

Of Things Let Go

(Saturday afternoon)

"I hear that you've been doing my job, again," Marcia said.

"Nope. I let Ted do it," Muriel grinned. "Seriously? We just grabbed them out of work and stashed them. No rescue to it."

"Legal says that they just got served with a notice charging Home with the abduction some valuable workers. Another one claims that certain businessmen were falsely accused of trying to sell a business they didn't own," Marcia said. "Neither of those sound like you."

"Have legal check with Ted on the charges of fraud and forgery against the accusers. That should take care of that. The company was owned by the workers we were supposed to have abducted. In actual fact, they all suddenly decided to take an unscheduled vacation to avoid the possibility of being abducted by a Japanese computer game company," Muriel said. "Oh, and one of those charges probably says something about the theft of company property, as in the computers that the workers were using. I've got news for you, and the hard facts to back it up. The group of programmers being referred to have an agreement between themselves – what amounts to a company – to create games. The computers and other equipment belong to them. They also OWNED the distribution company. They were unwise in their choice of people to run it. Those business people were trying to say that the programmers worked for the distribution company, and that the copyrights on their programs therefore belonged to the company. You want to see copies of the evidence we have? Talk to Alice."

"She's got the whole thing?" asked Marcia.

"She's got copies of it. Why?" asked Muriel.

"OK, then I'm putting squads on her and her people, and on their office. They'll be Envoys in stealth. They'll never know they're there," Marcia said. "This is heating up. The Japanese are now trying to say that the sale went through, and that we've stolen their property – and that includes the programmers."

"Check the signatures for signs of forgery. We've got a guy, here, that can give you an idea of what to look for," Muriel said. "He's a Crown Special Investigator. He works for me, but is assigned to Taylor. So don't ask him to check them, himself. Just ask him what to look for. He told me some of it, including one that I hadn't thought of – the possibility of trying to pass photocopies off as originals."

"OK, where do I find him?" asked Marcia.

"You don't. He finds you," said a male voice, behind her. And Marcia spun around.

"SHEESH! Don't scare a girl like that! Hmm. Nice duds, guy. So, you're Muriel's point man?" asked Marcia.

"And His Majesty's," Ralph said.

"Ah. Yea, Taylor's all right. I still remember how he tried to out-outrageous Muriel by mixing 'Tom O'Bedlam' with 'The Fairies', and ended up with a Regiment of people wearing green, riding ghost horses and grinning. Hi, I'm Marcia, and I'm Muriel's attack dog," and she promptly put on the wolf's head and licked her lips. After a moment of startlement, Ralph started laughing.

"OK, you got me. I didn't know how close you were to Taylor," Ralph said. "Obviously, close enough to call him by name."

"Yep. Except when being formal. And I've done that, too," Marcia grinned. "There someplace around here we can go, so I can pick your brain?"

"My office," Ralph said. "Hot and cold running Envoys to serve your every need, and a place to relax while I feed you what I know, and how I know it."

"Sounds good. Let's go," Marcia said, and Ralph translated her out.

Muriel looked over at Frankie. "Yes, she knew," she said. "But it was in her best interest to NOT know. She knows if I pick someone up, that they're an innocent. And she could see your stripes, so she knew you had to be honest. So, she just let it play out. Besides, she's just here to gather information. She knew Alice had a copy. She also knows that legal in America has a copy. Just as she knows that Ted has the originals locked up. Both sides know what the other has, and both sides know what the stakes are. The Japanese are trying to do this on bluff, though. The ones that are caught in the middle are the people you put in charge of distribution."

"OH! GAD! That's complex," Frankie said.

"Welcome to real life. Now you know why I don't play computer games," Muriel laughed.

"But, good grief, you've got to be thinking six moves ahead!" Frankie said.

"Ten. But I'm not doing all of it. The advantages of having a large group of people to help is that you CAN think that far ahead. We knew we had it covered when you came up with the paperwork for your companies," Muriel said. "Ralph added to it by telling us about the possibility of forged signatures. Buying your distributorship gave us the original documents, including how the forgery was done. And we've seen the Japanese documents, and KNOW that they only have copies, and not the originals. The American law office knows, too. Wait until this gets to court. It may be one of the shortest trials that I've seen. And I've seen some short ones," she added, laughing.

“O-K! I wonder how I can work this into a game,” Frankie said. “It wouldn't be an action game, though. Hmm.”

“Tell you what I'm gonna do,” Muriel said, sounding like a 'B' rated movie. “I'm gonna give you a stack of disks, and you can see some of what I've been through as Leader of Home. Some of it DEFINITELY has action.”

“You're kidding! No . . . you're NOT kidding,” Frankie said.

“The problem is that the stuff that had action happened FAST,” Muriel said. “There was lots of slow times in between. But yea, we've seen some action. I don't know if it would help you, but you're welcome to take a look, and mine it for whatever you can use.”

“OK, NOW I smell a possible self-interest in this. What'll it cost me?” asked Frankie.

“Nothing. The self-interest is that if you DO use actual Envoy techniques in it, it could result in people connecting. And those that already connected could end up learning how I do some of the things that seem so outrageous,” Muriel said. “It could also end up with some people thinking.”

“You sound like you've done this before,” Frankie said.

“Remember the action figures we put out?” asked Muriel.

“Yea. I had a set. Mom and dad thought I might like them. Shortly after that, they trained me. And suddenly those action figures were doing things that I didn't think were possible,” Frankie said.

“Those action figures were rigged to respond to trained people. And to trigger people that were close to connecting,” Muriel said. “My friends, the ones that were the reality behind 'Ambassadors All', were kept busy going around and assuring parents that their kids were all right, and that they just needed some training. That later led to our setting up the training stations.”

“I REMEMBER THOSE! Dad came home from work, early, one day,” Frankie said, “and said that they were needed. Meaning him and mom. They got my aunt to watch me, and cautioned me not to use the training around her, because she wasn't trained and wouldn't understand it. They were gone for about six hours. I saw them on television, that night. They'd been stopping people from violence around one of the training stations.”

“Yep. A lot of trainees helped out with that,” Muriel said. “That was a lot more excitement that we'd expected. So, were you a good girl and not use the training?”

“Nope,” Frankie said, complacently. “I ended up training her before mom and dad got back home.” And she snickered.

"You're a BAD GIRL! Francine Franklin."

"Yea, I know. But it's SO much fun," she replied, and they both laughed.

"So, how did your parents take that?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, once the deed was done, they took it pretty well. Aunt Abby had been going on for a long time about how the training was dangerous and should be abolished," Frankie said. "That's why mom and dad cautioned me to not show any of it around her. Well, that was fine, until it was time for lunch and, clumsy me, I dropped a plate. So, naturally, I popped a shield under it to catch it and bring it back up to the table. Oops. She saw it, and wanted to know how I did it. Well, stupid me, I told her about souls, and she connected. So I had to finish the training." And Muriel was laughing.

"You got her all the way through?" asked Muriel when she finally calmed down.

"Yep. And three weeks later, someone came around to the house, passing out passports. Aunt Abby was there, at the time, and got hers, then," Frankie said. "Can I ask, why did someone have to come around to the house to pass out passports?"

"Oh, that's simple. Look at the certificate inside it. Or even just the front cover. The Home logo. That's what shows that it's official. And only Ambassadors know how to make that," Muriel said. "We COULD use Envoys for it, but it's been a long-standing rule that Envoys HAVE to work for a human, under human supervision, on earth. I didn't make the rule, by the way."

"Who did?" Frankie asked.

"Ted. He was Leader at the time. And there were elements of the American government that were suspicious of 'foreigners' being able to work in America – even in the Enclaves – without supervision. They tried to clamp down on those that were trained, too. But that was later, when I was named as Leader. Not that I knew about it, at the time. The fact that I was an American citizen – something that Ted couldn't show because officially he was dead – managed to stop that action. It's since been stretched further. Mata?" Mata just came in and showed Frankie her passport. "So, Britain and America have pushed this through, and other countries with Enclaves are falling into line."

"WOW! So, now Envoys can go anywhere they want?" asked Frankie.

"In any country with an Enclave," Muriel said. "Basically, the only ones that would be affected are those that are in squads headed by a human, anyway. But it's another step, and bigger than I expected."

"Who managed to push that through?" asked Frankie.

"Taylor," Muriel said. "We had a hassle over the building of 'The Welcoming One'. Between the unions and the Customs and Immigration, it was starting to ramp up into a real

problem. So Taylor cut the Gordian Knot by pointing out that people with passports could go between Enclaves, freely, and that they were to be treated as citizens of whatever country they were in. In other words, free access. And Mata made up passports for Carla's and my squads, immediately. And that shut down the Customs and Immigration. The unions were shut down under different statutes. They'd used violence to try to stop the building's use. They got nailed with terrorist crimes charges, and they held up in court. Ted told Melanie about it – oh, sorry, President Carter – and she rammed it through Congress.”

“I take it that you know President Carter?” Frankie said.

“I trained her. The first adult that I trained. She was Secret Service, at the time. And right afterward became the President's Detail Chief. And she's the one that trained him,” Muriel said.

“Geez! You know everyone!” Frankie said.

“Well, maybe not everyone. But certainly a few that are up there. You've got to consider, though,” Muriel said, “that as the Leader of Home, I out-rank all of them. So, if there's a problem between Home and a country, I'm very likely called in. In some cases, I've met the leaders BEFORE the problems occur. And they know I'm nasty and can't be bullied. So they don't even try. Anna, in Russia, is the same way. She pinned the President of Russia's ears back right off the bat. As a result, she's on good relations with him. And the government, there, has learned that if she shows up in a session they're in trouble, and people are likely to be arrested.”

“How come you never became the Leader of earth?” Frankie asked.

“Never wanted it. It's much better for the countries to clean up their own mess. If I had to go in and do it, then I'd be a tyrant,” Muriel said. “You'll see what happened when the UN tried to do that to me. That's one of the episodes on the disks. Oh, warning. A lot of what's on there should be rated 'R' for violence, and sometimes sexual content, like the time I whipped a man in front of the UN.”

“I remember that. That was the President of Iran. May I ask? Why'd you do that?” Frankie asked.

“The UN wanted me to take care of the Iran problem. The biggest problem they had was that the President was over there, constantly agitating them and confusing them,” Muriel said. “Well, after all, they were politicians, and easily confused. Especially when they were being lied to about what was going on. In the case of the President of Iran, he'd constantly bad-mouthed those with Envoy training, and in particular me. So, I hauled him out and made it plain that he'd been lying to everyone, including his own people, and that it was against the teachings of his own religion. And I punctuated it with the whipping. He was alive when I sent him back to Iran. And the UN came to understand that they REALLY didn't want me to be their ruler.”

“You've had to deal with a lot, haven't you?” Frankie asked.

“See for yourself,” Muriel replied. “Right from the time my training started – and it took longer, then – I had people trying to kill me. Then, add to that the fact that I was twelve years old, and having to deal with adults that thought that they knew more than I did. THAT'S why all those certificates on the wall. I constantly had to be better than they were, and understand more, and be able to articulate it. And, sometimes, just out-bully them.”

“Do you ever regret getting into this?” asked Frankie.

“Nope. I won't say it was easy, and I won't say that I always liked what I was doing,” Muriel said. “But it was always challenging, and always worthwhile. And I could sleep nights knowing that I'd done the best I could in the circumstances. And I knew that because I kept checking things against my balance. So, every time I go back to Home and go through the Judgment, it's just a minor blip for me.”

Chapter 12

What Goes Around

(Monday afternoon, two weeks later)

"This hearing is to determine what evidence, if any, is admissible for the case of Chardash Games versus Francine Franklin, et al, and the government of Home. Are the parties here?" Judge Wright asked.

"Your honor, my clients are currently in jail on various charges, and are not let out for a civil matter, due to their being a flight risk," the plaintiff's attorney said.

"Your honor, my clients are present, as are all witnesses as per the request of the court," Alice said. "Due to the circumstances, we waive the right of the defense to have the plaintiffs physically here. Their depositions are a part of the assembled evidence, and should suffice."

"Plaintiff, do you agree to this?" asked Wright.

"We do, your honor," he replied.

"Very well, plaintiff, you can start," Wright said.

"Your honor, we intend to prove that Francine Franklin and the other programmers were employees of Chardash Games, and that they were forcibly abducted from their place of employment and unlawfully enticed to sell a company they did not own to the government of Home."

"OK, I'm going to stop you, there," Wright said. "And the reason I'm stopping you is that you have entered only copies of documents alleging that the company was yours, and that the programmers were employees. On the other hand, I've seen the original documents, and the sworn attestation that the signatures on those that you offered are forgeries. Before you can continue this case, you'll have to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that your clients do, in fact own the company. I've also read the depositions, and I've got to say that they also fail to establish that your clients own Chardash Games. Do you have ANYTHING to establish that ownership?"

"Your honor, you have what I have," the lawyer said.

"Then it is the finding of this court that your clients do not have standing to bring any action against Francine Franklin and the other programmers, nor against the government of Home. In addition, I see no evidence of forcible abduction, nor enticement. I do see sworn statements from the programmers that they went willingly into Home asylum, and that they willingly sold the company to Home. They being the founders and sole owners of said company," Wright said. "For this reason, your petition to this court is rejected with prejudice. This hearing is adjourned, and my findings will be published in the next two weeks. I will ask

the defense to stay for a few minutes. Everyone else is dismissed.”

When the attorney for the plaintiffs had left, Wright turned to Alice. “You know, young lady, it's gotten so that when I see gray uniforms in my court I know which way the hearing or trial is going to go,” he said, and Alice laughed. “Now, I know Muriel and Ted, of course. And I can presume that these others populating your table are the defendants. I also know Marcia and her 'red coats', and am happy to see you, again. But who is that in the blue with the strange device on his hat?”

“Your honor,” Muriel began.

“Ed, Muriel. You know better. Court is adjourned. I'm just me,” Wright said.

“All right, Ed, the man in blue is the Crown Special Investigator for His Majesty, King Taylor,” she finished. “Deeper in the attachments were connections to a Japanese gaming company that was trying to own these people. It was them that prompted the businessmen to so overstep themselves and try forgery to sell the company. They figured that they could get away with it long enough to get out of the country to someplace that wouldn't extradite them. Ralph was here to verify his deposition concerning forgery methods, and answer questions, if necessary.”

“Well, the forgeries might have convinced the Japanese. But not me. Particularly since Alice had included samples of the handwriting of these people to show normal variance,” Wright said. “You say that there's criminal charges being brought against them?”

“Yes, sir,” Alice replied. “Judge Hitchcock will be presiding. I don't expect any problems there, either.”

“No, there wouldn't be. His first name is Richard. But EVERYBODY refers to him as 'Wild Bill', because of his methods in court,” Wright said, grinning. “ESPECIALLY when a lawyer tries to put something over on him. Of course, NOT to his face. If they try using the same 'evidence' there that they tried here, there's apt to be sanctions.”

“Well, I hope you get a reserved seat, then, sir,” Alice said, grinning. “Because that's exactly what they're doing. That's why we had so much for you. We were preparing for both trials, and figured that if we prepared for the toughest and used the same evidence, here, that it would save us some time.” And the judge leaned back and roared with laughter.

“Well played, Alice. Very well played. And I'll see what I can do about actually attending this performance. Muriel, I understand that you've moved to Britain, now,” he said.

“Well, I thought it might be a good idea to at least appear to be close to my consort,” Muriel said.

“HA! Yes. Good point. And how is that working out for you? No conflicts because of it being two different governments?” he asked, chuckling.

"Nope. Oh, I had to demote Taylor from Ambassador to Britain to just Ambassador Liaison. All that really means is that when something affects both Britain and Home, we can discuss it and come to a resolution," Muriel said. "There's really no conflict, there. It's the same sort of thing that he was doing, anyway."

"Well, I'm very happy to see you again, and even happier to see that YOU are happy, young lady. You deserve all the happiness you can get. And now, I suppose I should get back to work," he said. And the crowd took the hint, and translated out.

"Is it always like that?" Mike asked, finding a chair in Muriel's casual area.

"I can answer that," Alice said. "No, not always. But more so these days. We've had to fight it out in court a few times. But the past few years we've taken a tip from Muriel and gotten our evidence in order to such a degree that judges dread one of our cases, just because the attachments and depositions take so much time to read. I've never tried a case in front of Hitchcock," she added, "but I've been a visitor to his court in the gallery. The man has been noted to play to his nickname, using a replica of the Colt 1851 Navy revolver as a gavel, on occasion. Particularly when a lawyer is blatantly out of line or unprepared. This is apt to be . . . um . . . interesting."

"You're kidding! Is that legal to use a gun as a gavel?" asked Mike.

"Well, you've got to understand Arizona, Mike," Alice said. "This was the last of the continental territories to become a state. It became the 48th state of the union on February 14, 1912. It was very much a wild west territory. And that attitude is best reflected in the IMMIGRANTS to the state, not the natives. There's a certain image that's almost expected in this state. And Judge Hitchcock plays into that. The replica is very much a dummy, and could never actually be fired, even if somebody has a way to load a cap and ball pistol. Nope. It's for show, not use. In fact, I don't even think it has a trigger. It's far older than even the single action, cartridge Colt Peacemaker. The one that the Buntline Special was supposed to be modeled after."

"Geez! You've got a lot of information on him," Frankie said.

"Yep. The reason why is because I ASKED him," Alice said. "He showed me the gun when I mentioned that I'd heard rumors about it. He told me that I was the first person to actually ask him about it, and described the background. It's the model that the real James Butler 'Wild Bill' Hitchcock carried. When people started calling him that – behind his back. NOBODY'S had the guts to call him that to his face – he got a friend to make one for him, and specified that it not actually be able to fire. He never acknowledged to anyone but me that he even knew about it. So don't ANY of you mention it. It's become an inside joke that he plays to. And yes, his superiors know about it, and laugh. They know what he's doing. When he brings that out, it's a lawyer that's in trouble, NOT a plaintiff or defendant. And yes, he knows that I'm presenting the prosecution of this case. That's why I met him was to introduce myself, and make sure he had my credentials and all the paperwork to appear in his court."

"So, what do you think of him?" asked Muriel.

"He's honest. Asked me about my work and training. Offered his condolences on my being your lawyer," Alice said, which caused Muriel to laugh. "Some of the questions he asked cause me to do some research on him. He wanted to know what companies I took money from. Also my political affiliation. I was straight with him, letting him know that I'd only ever worked for Home and the Enclave, and now directly for Muriel, alone. That my education was augmented by courses from the University of Home – he asked a LOT about that. And that what I was registered didn't constitute what I voted, and wasn't involved in any political parties."

"Then, I looked him up," Alice added. "He's clean. No outside money, and no politics. And his cases show that, too. I looked them up. He's apt to rip up a lawyer, but that doesn't affect the way he applies the law. He's relatively gentle with juries, unless he finds a potential juror that isn't being honest. And he's gentle with plaintiffs and defendants. The gallery is another matter. He's thrown people out for disruptions, but then, many judges have done that, so that's not unusual. Nope, in all, the 'Wild Bill' act is strictly that, and only for the lawyers. Oh, and he'd already seen my briefs and the attachments, and was impressed with the amount of work I put into a case. And, he'd like to meet you, Muriel."

"Any time. And you can tell him that. Either his place or mine," Muriel added, grinning at the usual reference to assignments. "And either before or after the trial."

"Well, good. Because there's every possibility that I can get him over here today. But not with Frankie and her crew here, I think. And don't mention the trial. I'M telling you that. If he asks, refer him to me," Alice said.

"I can do that," Muriel said. "I know what a stickler you are for that, and it's saved me a few times. I won't buck that."

"Good! Then I'll give him a call in a little bit – I know he's busy right now – and see if he'd like to come meet you," Alice said. "I'll have to go get him, as he can't translate. He isn't trained, but he knows about the training."

"OK, I wonder if he'd like to have lunch, here," Muriel said. "Twelve o'clock there would be about seven pm, here, and Taylor would be free to join us."

"And you don't want me to tell him about Taylor joining," Alice said. "I KNOW you, girl. You're just that nasty. I suppose you want me to translate him to the OUTSIDE of your office, to give him the full effect, too, don't you."

"Well, it HAD occurred to me," Muriel said, grinning. "Do you think I could get away with it?"

"Knowing you, probably," Alice said. "OK, I'll see if I can set it up, and see how much time he has available."

"Thanks, Alice," Muriel said, seriously.

"It's HIM that should be thanking YOU, Muriel," Alice said. "Now, you WILL be nice to him, won't you?"

"Of COURSE I will. How could you think otherwise," Muriel said. "After all, he's presiding over a trial I'm involved in. I wouldn't want THAT to go sour," she added. And grinned. "Oh, ask him what he'd like to eat. Taylor and I can work around just about anything. And you KNOW what Chuck is like. He can come up with anything, with a little warning."

"OK, let me call him," Alice said. "Hello? Judge Hitchcock? Your Honor, this is Alice Wilson. I'm calling from the office of the Leader of Home and Ambassador to earth. She found out that you were interested in meeting her, and wondered what you were doing for lunch. Oh, I'm sure it would be no problem. I can pick you up and have you in her office very quickly. And one of her staff is an accomplished chef that rivals those in the American Enclave. And I know, because I've sampled most of the restaurants there, as well as meals he's prepared, over the years. Oh, I'm sure she'd be happy to go over all that with you. No, it won't put her out at all. You've got to realize that she really doesn't use all her fancy titles under normal circumstances. Yes, that's right. Uh, huh. No problem. The trip is quit brief, and you won't feel a thing. Nope. Nothing like what you see in the movies or television. Nothing you can imagine. I just wanted to be sure that you'd be free for a couple of hours. Her time is flexible. It's only emergencies that could cause problems, and she's had less and less of them over the years. It's a standing joke that we try to plan her emergencies twenty four hours in advance, so we don't disturb her nap time. You'll understand when you meet her, sir. And what would you like for lunch, Your Honor? Really? Oh, dear. Well, maybe her chef can come up with something that would ease that. Or a friend of hers, a doctor. Oh, very good, I assure you. I'll alert Chuck to the problem. I think he can have either one available for you without any trouble. And I'll get in touch with that doctor, and see what she says. Nope. No cost. Guest Rights, sir. And my boss takes them VERY seriously. Sometimes, we kid her that it's the ONLY thing she takes seriously. That's changed a bit, now, but you'll understand why when you meet her. And may I make a suggestion, sir? DON'T try to imagine what she's like. I made that mistake before I first met her, and it took me months to overcome it. Yes. Yes, she's like no one you've ever met before. Very good, sir. I'll be there. Thank you."

"WHOOSH!" Alice said. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to talk about you without using your name?" Muriel giggled.

"Well," she said, "I'd say you did a nice job of it. From the sound of it, he's expecting an old battle wagon that sets exacting standards, and insists on an afternoon nap."

"Oh, surely nothing so important. More like a young child that throws tantrums," Alice said. And they both laughed.

"So, Alice, are you going to stay for dinner?" Muriel asked.

"I'm not sure of the protocol. Is that acceptable?" Alice asked.

"You forget. In here, I'm the one that sets protocol. And there isn't any," Muriel said. "If I want my friend the lawyer to attend, I can have her. Might make it a bit more casual if he understands that you ARE my friend. You are, aren't you?"

"Beast. I tried being subservient to you when you were twelve, and you wouldn't have any of it," Alice said. "At first, I thought it was because you considered me your superior in education. And a month later I found out that you had more education than I did. You've never let me be anything BUT your friend. THEN, I found out that you try to be a friend to everybody."

"Well, it DOES make it easier. I hope I can get that across to the Judge, too," Muriel said, seriously.

"Muriel, you remember how you treated Judge Wright?" asked Alice.

"Of course. Nervous, at first, that he'd think we were trying to bribe him. Then casual, like I treat everyone else," Muriel said.

"So, just treat him casually. HE'S the one that asked to meet you. And you're going WAY out of your way, by his lights, in meeting with him and offering him lunch," Alice said. "You won't have any problems."

"I hope so," Muriel said.

Chapter 13

What Goes Around Gets Served Lunch

(Monday evening)

Muriel watched out her window at a minute to seven pm, nervously waiting for Alice and the Judge to arrive. “Easy, girl,” Mata said from her desk. “They’ll be here. I’ve never seen you like this, before.”

“I’ve never had the opportunity to screw up this badly, before,” Muriel replied. And then it was too late for worry. There was Alice, and there was a man with a very puzzled look on his face, saying something to her. And Alice simply pointing to the door and saying something, then starting for the door. The door whooshed open, and the man stopped.

“It’s OK. It won’t close as long as we’re in range of the sensor,” Alice said. And that was Muriel’s cue.

“Hi! Welcome. My name is Muriel. Come in,” she said, from inside the door.

“Muriel, this is His Honor, Judge Hitchcock,” Alice said, preceding the man.

“Come in, Your Honor. Have a seat,” Muriel said, and turned toward her casual area.

“Oh, my! This is quite an office. And quite a trip. Why is it so dark?” he asked.

“Seven hour time difference,” Muriel said. “You’re in Britain.”

“Isn’t the Ambassador here?” he asked, and suddenly Muriel relaxed.

“Oh, dear. OK, if I must, I must,” Muriel said. “Your Honor, my name is Muriel. I’m the Leader of Home, and Ambassador to the people of earth. Now, let’s see if I can get the rest of the titles right. I’m the Chancellor of the University of Home, Marshal of the Forces of Home – Ted was in a bit of a peeve, that day – Trainer, and troubleshooter. What did I miss, Mata?”

“You’re also the head of the Envoy Enclave Enterprises,” Mata replied. “And my boss. Good afternoon, Your Honor. I’m Mata, Muriel’s Security Chief and head of her squads.”

The Judge looked at her, strangely, then at Alice’s encouragement, walked in and took a seat.

He’d just set down when Taylor came in. “Hope I’m not late,” he said.

“Nope. He just got here. Dear, this is Judge Hitchcock. Your Honor, my consort, Taylor,” Muriel said. It took a moment, but then the dime dropped – inflation, you know. It used to be a penny.

"You're . . . ," the Judge began, standing. Then tried again. "Your Majesty."

Taylor just stuck out his hand, and the Judge reflexively took it. "Just Taylor. Especially in here, I'm out-ranked. Only the ruler of a country, don't you know. She's Leader of a whole universe. And she never uses her titles unless someone's trying to bully her. Actually," he added, shaking the Judge's hand, "it's rather a good attitude, don't you think? Titles put up a barrier between people. But just her name, alone, makes things more comfortable. Friendlier. Sit. Sit. If I know Muriel, Chuck should be along soon." And the Judge finally sat, his mouth hanging open.

"Muriel! I just . . . OH! Sorry," Fran said, translating in. "I didn't realize you had company. Hi, I'm Fran, I'm a friend of Muriel's," she added, holding out her hand. He took it, and she went on. "I'm a doctor. That's why the white uniform. Envoy style doctor. Much neater and less bothersome than what you may be used to. In fact, I've been one since I was twelve. Got turned loose to act on my own when I saved a man's life on Muriel's recliner. Oh, that was in her old office, in the American Enclave. So, let's see. Neck pinch – vertebra realigned, heart and lungs, good. Stomach – ah! A bit of a problem there, nothing serious, not at this point, and never will be again unless you let worries and problems get to you. OH! You were in sports when you were younger. And that knee never healed right. No sweat. It shouldn't bother you, anymore, either. Torn cartilage repaired and strengthened. Yep, Muriel. Curry shouldn't bother him, if that's what he'd like." And she released his hand with a smile.

"What . . . ?"

"Oh, Chuck told me that you like Curry, but can't eat it anymore because of an ulcer," Fran said. "Well, it wasn't really an ulcer yet, though it had a good start on it. And now it's gone. If you're worried, you can always have your second choice. But really, it's repaired and shouldn't bother you again, unless you let yourself get stressed out a lot," Fran said.

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. This stuff is easy. Putting a man's heart together, now THAT'S tough. Had a few others that were nearly as tough, but nothing that matched the speed we had to work on that," Fran said. "That took five minutes. Remove stents, clean and strengthen arteries, keep blood flowing while I repaired the man's heart. Muriel," Fran said, turning toward her friend, "I was going to invite you and Taylor to come to dinner with Don and I, tomorrow night."

"Possible conflict, Fran. Maybe another time. How's Don?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, him. EASY to please. Enough meals for two, and enough of me for three and he's happy," Fran said, causing the judge to choke. "We're working on making you a technical aunt."

"Oh, girl! Haven't you ever learned discretion?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. I had a good teacher. You," Fran said. "Well, I'll get out of here and let you get

back to what you were doing. Eat hearty, Your Honor. Speed healing can sometimes deplete one's system. Bye, Muriel, Taylor." And she translated out.

"Get the point, Your Honor?" Muriel asked.

"I think I'm beginning to. You don't ever use titles?" he asked.

"Oh, sure. Formal situations or, like I said, when someone's trying to bully me," Muriel said. "I tend to out-bully them. Taylor's learned that there's a time and a place for using titles, but, again, it's only when he has to. The rest of the time he tries to be friendly and find out what people REALLY need, not what they think a King wants to hear."

"You're human?" he asked, bluntly.

"Oh, yes. Oh, and I can see where this is going," Muriel said. "My full name is Muriel White. But, like the Envoys, I only use one name for most situations. Professionally, because that and my titles tend to put people at arms length. Personally, like with friends, because that keeps the situation on a friendly basis. The Envoys, of course, only ever have one name they go by. They distinguish by the mental signature when there's more than one with the same name. And actually, the names they use, here, aren't even their real names. Their real ones can't be pronounced with human equipment. And now you're going to ask if there are any around. There are. There's exactly four humans in this room, and you're one of them. Alice, Taylor and I are the other three. All the ones outside this casual area are Envoys."

"What? But everyone out there looks human!" he said.

"Of course. They pretty much act human, too," Muriel said. "Ah! Chuck. Come in."

"Ready, Muriel?" Chuck asked.

"I think so. Your Honor, what would you like," asked Muriel.

"Well, to begin with, maybe I should take a tip from you and have you call me Richard. Not Dick, if you don't mind. I'm not a Dick. Not even a tricky one," he said, smiling.

"Ah, yes. I can see where that could be a problem," Muriel said, smiling back and her eyes twinkling with amusement. "So, what can we get you for lunch?"

"Was that young lady right? That I can eat Curry, again?" he asked.

"In the nine years that she's been a doctor, she's never been wrong," Muriel said. "She's especially good with women and children – putting them at ease. Mostly, she deals with bumps and bruises and upset stomachs in the American Enclave. But she's also on call at a few hospitals in the Phoenix area. She gets called in when things start going bad in an operation. Goes in for a few minutes, deals with whatever the problem was, and gets people fixed up. They come out of the operation wondering why there's no pain, and no mark of an incision, and never realize that they were taken care of by a 'mere girl' using Envoy style

techniques. So, what would you like?"

"There are Curries that aren't as spicy as most people think, if you'd like something gentler," Chuck said. "And, of course, I can come up with lamb, chicken, fish, or just about anything that you like."

"I think I'd like to try. Lamb, I think, if that's not too much trouble," Richard said.

"No trouble at all. Muriel, you wanted that stew? Taylor, the Stroganoff? Alice?" asked Chuck.

"OH! I'm torn. Make it the Stroganoff, I think. Noodles?" she asked.

"No problem. I know Taylor likes it over rice. So, just a few minutes and it'll be here. What about drinks. Muriel, you're having milk. You've had enough coffee, today. Taylor?" Chuck asked.

"Tea," he said.

"Russian or British?" asked Chuck, grinning.

"British. Russian is good, alone. But I don't think it goes as well, even with a Russian dish. In fact, I think they usually drank vodka," Taylor said. "I'll have to ask Sergei, sometime."

"And Alice?"

"Am I allowed a Rob Roy?" she asked.

"Yep. Muriel's of age, now, so no one can complain that we're contributing to the delinquency of a minor," Chuck said, grinning.

"You couldn't anyway," Muriel said. "I've never gone underground to dig for anything. And from what I understand, minors could contribute to their own delinquency."

"True. Of both sorts," Alice said. "As I have had ample reason to know. Richard, you wouldn't believe how much trouble this girl can be. Or get into. The American Enclave has a fully staffed law office, and most of the work we had was just TRYING to keep her out of trouble." And the Judge snorted a short laugh.

"What about you, sir," asked Chuck.

"I think, if I'm going to try Curry, that I'd better stick to milk, too," he said. "You know, that was neatly done. You managed to let me know that I could have something alcoholic, and gave me time to make a decision without making me feel foolish," he said.

"Ah! Caught out. We DO try to make people feel comfortable, sir," Chuck said,

grinning. "And you've been thrown into a very strange situation. You needed the bit of normalcy and time to adjust to it. Yes, things happen fast, around Muriel. But the key is that they're relaxed. She actually is a very good boss, in that respect."

"And this is all you do? Just make meals for her?" Richard asked.

"Oh, no. My squad is general housekeeping, usually. But we also go out with her for rough situations. And, of course, I'm also her plumber," Chuck said. "Running joke – every once in a while she threatens to call me Upchuck. And I threaten to feed her cat food, or even let her make do with somebody else's cooking for a while. Never happened, though, and probably never will. It's FUN working for her. Just a couple of minutes, and your meals will be here." And he translated to the kitchen area.

"I was noticing three things," Richard said. "The first is that we seem to be sitting outside. But I KNOW there's a building around this office."

"Oh, that. Another friend of mine, Carla, designed the office for me. The walls and ceiling are actually a computer screen that's been taught to make it look like we're outside in a meadow, near a grove of trees. And she told it to make it a true three dimensional image. So, what was the next thing?"

"All the certificates, there. That seems to be a lot of different fields. Do you really understand all of them?" asked Richard.

"I've had to. Those are all PhD level degrees, and I've been collecting them for nine years. And they're all different disciplines, because I got them as I went along, to be able to understand what was happening in given situations," Muriel said.

"And those sculptures. Who did them?" Richard asked.

"Me. Just a hobby. But it keeps me busy and off the streets between crisis," Muriel grinned.

"It's hard to believe that you've got doctorates in all those things," Richard said.

"Oh, it's easy to get them, when you've got the Envoy training. Betty just dumps them straight to my soul, and I'm ready to go," Muriel said. "Maybe five minutes per course. The latest was British law. I'd had American federal law back when I was twelve, in order to understand some of what was going on at the time. Political science and such, because we were having trouble with Congress, and I needed to know why. It came in handy, years later, when I got involved in international relations, and needed to understand where the attitudes of the various diplomats were coming from. Mostly, I found that they were trying to bully me. And I just don't bully worth a damn."

"Believe it," Taylor said. "She ran right over the top of my grandmother when she was twelve. At sixteen, she made the President of Russia back down and become her friend – it's dangerous to become her enemy – then turned around and found an Ambassador for Russia

that was as bad as she was, and even younger than she had been when she started. And she saved me when I was fourteen. Beginning to hear other people's thoughts in my head, and she homed in on me and found out what the problem was, then sheltered me until I could get trained and protect myself."

"You sound like you're in love with her," Richard said. "Oh, DUH! Of course you are, You consorted with her. Why not a marriage?"

"Marriage is a contract – both between the people and between them and the government," Taylor said. "I didn't really understand it until recently. But consorting is simply a commitment between the people. The government isn't involved."

"Then, what enforces it?" asked Richard.

"The balance. You'd have to go through the Judgment to really understand," Taylor said. "But basically, it's how much harm you'd cause to other people for an action you took. The more harm, the worse the Judgment is for you. The less harm, the easier the Judgment is. And, if you can manage to cause no harm, then you wouldn't even notice it."

"And who judges you?" asked Richard.

"Ah," Taylor said, "that's the rough part. You judge yourself, but without excuses or rationalizations. You literally see what harm you caused by your actions. Until recently, almost all people went through it at the end of their lives. And many didn't make it. Their soul suicided from the shame and guilt. But trained people – FULLY trained, that is – experience it every time they go to Home. And that's the last part of the training, is that trip to Home that they make themselves, voluntarily. And trust me, NO one that goes through the Judgment once wants to experience the same level of guilt that the first time engenders."

"You've been through it?" asked Richard.

"Many times," Taylor replied. "Muriel even more so. She has friends she visits, there. And she's so in tune with her balance that it's barely a glitch for her."

"OK, would you tell me more about the training?" Richard asked.

Chapter 14

The Outrageous Training of an Outrageous Man (Monday evening, later – Tuesday afternoon, a week later)

“What the training gives you is the basics,” Taylor said, going into teacher mode. “First is the connection to power. Power that drives everything else. Then, there’s how to create shields. And only the basics are taught during training. What can be done with shields is so vast and varied a subject that no one really stops learning about them. Third is the ability to translate from one point to another, either from a remembered image of the area, or even from a photograph or someone else’s image of it, anywhere on earth. And the last is the translation to Home, and return. Trainees that return are counted as Citizens of Home, and can go back any time they want.”

“How long does it take?” asked Richard.

“That depends on the individual. The longest was four days,” Muriel said. “And that was my parents. The shortest was about a quarter of a day, and that was the Ambassador to Russia. She was eleven when she was trained. My parents were under the old style of training, before we understood as much about Envoys as we know now. Anna was using the new style of training.”

“Cost?” asked Richard.

“Nothing,” Muriel said. “Humans were meant to have the Envoy techniques. The Envoys actually WANT us to learn. Because the more of us that learn, the more they learn. Well . . . that discussion can wait for later. The point is that we supply everything that you need for the training, including trainers, food, medical, clothing as necessary – and you’ll find out more about that if you decide to take the training – shelter, if it goes overnight. And it all costs nothing.”

“I’ve wondered about the training for a couple of years, now. But finding time to take it is the problem,” Richard said.

“OK, I can understand that. Now, what if I told you that we could give you the ‘no frills’ version in a couple of hours, then fill out the rest at your convenience?” asked Muriel.

“You could do that?” Richard said.

“If you’re willing,” Muriel said. “This isn’t something that we can force people to take. You have to ask to be trained.”

“Then yes, if I can be trained, I’d like to,” Richard said.

“Taylor?” asked Muriel.

"Your trainee. I'll help, of course, but it's your lead. Besides, I LOVE watching you work," Taylor said.

"Oh, yea," Muriel said, "and I can just hear you thinking 'because you do it so seldom'. Goof!"

"Hey, if you don't want to," Taylor said, "There's plenty of people around that could do it. Heck, Judge Wright could train him."

"You're KIDDING!" Richard exclaimed. "He's trained?"

"Oh, sure. We just explained the difference between Envoys and humans," Muriel said. "Envoys are nothing but power – intelligent power, if you will. Some people call it 'soul'," she added, and stopped. She didn't need to go any further.

"You're getting better at this," Taylor said.

"The trick is to take them by surprise," Muriel said. "If they're thinking too hard about what you're talking about, then it takes longer. That dodge of talking about Judge Wright put him in 'story telling' mode. He figured that I was going to tell him a story, and relaxed. Then I pulled the 'gotcha', and he connected."

"Yes," said Richard. "And that's a nasty trick. But I see why you do it."

"Welcome back, Richard," Muriel said. "And before you ask, your human side is still in control. Your soul simply adds past experience and further abilities, like being able to absorb an entire PhD degree in minutes. We'll get into that, later. To start with, we need to upgrade your personal shield. Then, we'll show you another application of shields, by having you make your own clothes. Taylor will take over for that. Then a quick refresher course in translation, mainly on how to do it on earth without running into something or someone. He'll probably act as monitor for that, too, since he knows the Palace and grounds better than I do. And then it's the trip to Home and back."

It took an hour, then a grinning Richard Hitchcock was sitting back in his chair. He had new clothes, thanks to the clothier from America coming over and helping. And Jeff had come in and issued phone and tablet, and shown him how to use them. Now, he was calling up cases and law, and comparing them to what he would have done.

"Do you realize," Richard finally said, "that this, right here, will save me a vast amount of time. Far more than I spent getting trained. THAT would have been a selling point to me, right there."

"Would you have believed it if we'd told you?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. Yea, I see what you're saying. It would have sounded like one of those scam ads on television," Richard said. Then he looked over at Alice. "And you're trained. I should have realized that when you translated me over here."

"Are you kidding? It's the only way I manage to keep up with her," Alice said. "The first thing I did was to get one of her Envoys, Betty, to dump the whole British law into me. Then I took and passed the bar. And THEN I went looking for a place to put an office," she added, and Richard laughed.

"No wonder you can come up with such detailed briefs and back it up with hard evidence," he said. "I don't think your opponent is trained."

"I know he isn't. And most lawyers aren't," Alice said. "The reason is because they have something to hide. They'd never have passed what Muriel calls the 'sniff test'. With some people, the first thing she does is see if they can make the mental connection necessary for monitoring a trainee, and passing him or her information. I was lucky. I passed."

"Well, I hate to leave. But it's getting late for you, and there are some things I need to do in my office," Richard said. "Alice, would you take me back, please?"

"Nope. But I'd be happy to monitor you while you do it," she said. "All it takes is confidence and practice. And remembering to look around so you don't run into anybody or anything."

"You're welcome to come back here, any time, Richard," Muriel said. "Even if it's just for coffee. This is an open office. We sometimes have things that we keep quiet until it's time to spring them. Investigations and such. But that shouldn't cause any trouble."

"Thank you, Muriel. And now I realize why you do it. Why you only use one name. If I'd spent the time 'Madam Ambassador-ing' you, I'd never have gotten trained. Thank you," Richard said, and he and Alice translated out.

"I think you made a friend," Taylor said.

"Yep. I just hope that it doesn't queer the trial," Muriel replied.

"It shouldn't. Alice doesn't seem worried," Taylor said.

And she wasn't. A week later his court was packed with gray uniforms, red tunics, and one lonesome blue tunic. And the row of somewhat miss-matched civilian clothing worn by the programmers. And Judge Hitchcock was speaking.

"Tell me, sir. Did you read ANY of the prosecution's brief? Or the attachments? I've read yours. Tell me what part of yours is a defense. Tell me why you shouldn't be charged with incompetence," he said, his voice getting louder. "Tell me why you feel that a plea of 'not guilty' is justifiable in this case. Oh, we'll try it under that plea. But I've got to tell you that you stand as much chance of surviving this as you would have if you'd fed yourself into a meat grinder. You, sir, will end up a laughingstock. I'd be surprised if you retain your license to practice law. A first year law student could do better. You have cited no case law. You have

offered no admissible evidence of ownership of the company. EVERYTHING YOU HAVE DONE WOULD LEAD ANY ORDINARY JURY TO FIND YOUR CLIENTS GUILTY OF ALL CHARGES!" he roared. "AND THAT WITHOUT THE PROSECUTION EVEN STATING THEIR POSITION!"

He took a deep breath, and pulled the famous gun out from under the desk. "Sir," he said, "I know you had enough time to develop a proper defense. I even visited you and pointed out areas where your defense could be improved. You did none of it."

"Sir, I'm under orders from my clients to present it this way," the lawyer said. "They feel very strongly that they're in the right."

"So, now you claim it's not your fault. Not good enough, sir. Not by half. It's your responsibility to make sure that your clients understand the magnitude of the case against them, and to make responsible, informed decisions as a result," Judge Hitchcock said. "YOUR responsibility, sir. NOT your clients. They don't know the law. YOU do. Or, at least, you're supposed to. They are admitting that they forged the employment applications, on the grounds that the programmers, themselves, refused to sign them. They are admitting that they attempted to sell a company that they did not own, simply because they felt that they should have been the owners. They admit that THEY applied to the programmers for the positions in the distribution company – which, alone, shows that they KNEW that the company was owned by the programmers. THESE ARE ALL IN YOUR BRIEF! THEIR ADMISSIONS! THEIR WORDS! And yet you let them plea 'not guilty'. Disgusting, sir. You take these . . . persons, and get your asses over to that conference room and admit your incompetence to them, and get this straightened out. NOW! Because if this goes to trial, I assure you that it will be open to the media, including cameras, so that the whole world will know that you are an incompetent imbecile. Thirty minutes, sir. This court is in recess until then," and the butt of the gun came down on the sounding block with a resounding >BANG< that sounded like a coffin lid being slammed shut. The Judge glared the people out of the room. When the door finally closed behind them, his face relaxed and he smiled.

"The law west of the Pecos," Ted quietly said.

"I heard that, Ted," Hitchcock said. "Different man. And less confined to the law. I would hope I'm better than that. What saddens me is that I DID take the time to go over this with him. Something I didn't do with Alice. He can't claim favoritism, since I spent a day with him, showing him where he needed evidence, what NOT to say, things like that. Highlighting them so he'd remember. It wouldn't have changed the outcome, I don't think, unless we got a particularly stupid jury. And voir dire is supposed to weed that out. Among other things. But at least he wouldn't have looked like a total fool."

"I see why you use that replica as a gavel, now," Muriel said. "Very effective."

"What's more effective is that I also change the sounding block that I use," Richard said. "That's what give it its distinctive sound."

"Do you think it will help?" Muriel asked.

Richard sighed. "Not this time. His only hope is to request to be removed from the case. His clients really are that . . . well, it doesn't matter. I'll have to pass this on to a jury trial, and the profession will take a hit in the way it appears to the general public," he said. "It isn't really his clients fault, either. They're simply responding to what they see on television, thinking that if they repeat the same nonsense in a loud enough voice, and often enough, that it will be true."

"Well, you won't take the hit for it, anyway," Muriel said. "It sounds like you've done everything you can to avert a disaster. You're only responsible for the actions you take or don't take. You aren't responsible for the decisions of others. You did what you could to stop this. If he and the clients choose otherwise, then it's out of your hands."

"You know, that's a grim way of looking at it," Richard said.

"It's a realistic way of looking at it. Yes, you can grieve for him. But you can't help him if he won't help himself," Muriel said. "I've been through this. It took a very compassionate Envoy to straighten me out. You can't order people to change. You can't pass laws that they change. You can only enforce the laws you have, and by that maybe change those you don't even know about that may be contemplating the same sort of behavior."

"That sounds like the argument that gun advocates use," Richard said.

"Guns," Muriel snorted. "I've been shot at. I've been bombed. I've had missiles and grenades thrown at me. You wouldn't believe some of the ways people have tried to kill me. I'm still here, and they'll never understand that I'm more dangerous than they are. It isn't the weapon that's dangerous. It's the human mind. The ones that think that force is the only way to gain advantage. The bullies in society that don't understand that there are better ways to win, and without taking anything from anyone. The insane that have so lost themselves that their only recourse is to lash out at others. Often at others that have nothing to do with the way they feel. I'm not doing this for money. I'm not doing it for power. I'm doing it to give people that have been beaten down by society a chance to have what I have."

"You get paid for it," Richard said.

"My salary? I never touch it for myself. You know where it goes?" Muriel asked. "I fund things with it. The company that makes the phones, tablets and computers? A lot of that is funded by me. It's not an investment. It's an outright gift to the company. The building in London? Yes, it's staffed by Envoys. It was built by Envoys. The land was bought with money I made available for it. I don't get anything back for any of that. And I still try to find ways to give money away. I don't need it. You could dump me on the street without a penny, and by the end of the day I'd have shelter, clean water, sewage and garbage disposal, clothing, food, and communication. And all through the application of power and shields. THAT'S what I'm giving people. That ability."

"Why?" asked Richard.

“Because I was bullied as a child,” Muriel responded. “It’s as simple as that.” Whether she would have said more or not, the decision was taken from her. The defense attorney returned with his clients.

“Have you reached a decision?” asked Judge Hitchcock.

“They have, Your Honor. They have refused to change the brief, or their claims, or their plea,” the lawyer said.

“Then you’re going to trial. And may you have mercy on your souls,” Judge Hitchcock said, and cracked the butt of the gun on the sounding block again, ending the hearing.

Chapter 15

Investigations Yield Results

(Wednesday morning)

“Well, as far as I can tell, there's a private equity firm that is acting as the driver for investments for three banks. They play with the figures, selling back and forth,” Ralph said, “and scraping off a percentage of each 'sale'. They've got a pool of about sixty investments that they do this with, and another three hundred that are 'dumping grounds' for allowing the sixty to re-correct so they can do it again. The three hundred stay relatively stable, which is why they can dump the money from the sixty into them and get it back out fairly easily.”

“Do the banks know?” asked Taylor.

“You can bet they do. Since members of the boards of all three are what make up the private equity,” Ralph replied.

“Robot buys and sells?” asked Muriel.

“Yes. The speed is too fast to be human,” Ralph said. “Sorry, I should have mentioned that.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. That's why we discuss these things,” Muriel said. “Taylor, I thought you outlawed computer buys and sells.”

“We did. Apparently, they didn't believe me. Suggestions?” asked Taylor.

“We crash the private equity . That takes down the banks,” Muriel said.

“How?” asked Taylor.

“By enforcing the ban on electronic sales. Your stock exchange should be doing this, and obviously isn't,” Muriel said. “So, now, we do it for them. I can get a machine to intercept the buys and sells, and simply bit bucket them.”

“Bit bucket?” asked Ralph.

“We throw them away. They go nowhere,” Muriel said. “And if I know the banks and private equity the way I think I do, they'll try to get around it by invading the computer that's stopping them. They'll try cracking it.”

“Oh, oh,” Taylor said. “I think I see where this is going.”

“Yep. Jeff's computers are trained to search back through even anonymized links, and smoke the source. Picture a thousand volts at one amp. The source computers literally smoke,” Muriel said. “The only problem is having enough money to buy the banks when it

happens. Oh, and it leaves a trail to the source computers, so you can go in and roll up the private equity under computer cracking laws.”

“Nasty,” Taylor said.

“Yep. So, I need to contact Ted and see if we can do it,” Muriel said. “Hold on.” ::Ted, we need to be able to buy up three banks, here in Britain. They're dirty. And they're using a private equity firm to drive stock prices for them, so they appear clean on paper. It's computer generated sales, which are illegal, here. What I propose is to set a computer on the inputs to the stock market, and kill the sales there. When the private equity tries to crack the computer, they get smoked, and the banks income tanks.”

::When?: asked Ted.

::Whenever we can. I've got some money that can go in the pool to do this,:: Muriel replied.

::Nope. Home does this. How long will it take to put the computer in place?: he asked.

::Not long. We don't even have to physically do it. Jeff's computers. We just task one to stop the robot flow.:: she said.

::Nasty. OK pull the trigger. Warn Alice, first, and make sure you've got cutouts to do the dirty work. Let me know the cost, and it'll be covered,:: he said.

::Thanks,:: she replied.

“OK, we need some people or business that we own to act as buyers when the banks go down the tubes. And we need to warn Alice that she's going to have a mess of paperwork to do. Then we just drop the computer into place, and watch the fireworks,” Muriel said. “Ted's backing it out of Home.”

“Muriel,” Taylor said, suddenly, “Why are we waiting for them to try to crack the computer? We could just kill any computers making sales.”

“We could, but then we'd be guilty of computer fraud and abuse. But if they try to crack ours, then they're fair game,” Muriel said. “I know, it would be easier to just take them all down at once. But this way they are obviously set up to look like the bad guys. Ralph, I've got a tough task for you, and I'm going to help you to do it, because you've never done it before. So, don't take offense. Just as soon as even one computer is smoked, we're going to shut down the private equity's utilities, and hold everyone in shields. Then we go in and pull everyone out and turn them over to the Metropolitan police. And it'll take more people than we have in our squads, so we'll be calling for help from home.”

“I should get hold of Commissioner Smythe, and let him know what's going down,” Taylor said. “No sense in surprising him. That way he has an idea of how much manpower

and transportation he'll need."

"And storage for the perpetrators, too. Good point," Muriel said. "If we have to buy and convert a warehouse as a temporary holding facility, we should know in advance. Do you have any idea who we can use as cutouts?"

"Hmm. No. But I know who would," Taylor said. "::Dad, are you busy?::

::Nothing I can't drop for a bit. Where are you?:: the Prince asked.

::Muriel's office,:: Taylor sent, and gave him an image of the doors to the office.

"Taylor, you didn't did you?" asked Muriel. And was answered by a whoosh followed by an exclamation.

"Young man, King or not, that was a nasty trick to play on your father," the Prince said, coming in.

"Oh, come on, dad. You saw it in Muriel's old office, and you saw it in mine. Why would we change?" Taylor retorted, grinning.

"Well, SOMETHING has certainly changed," his father said. "Who did this? It's phenomenal!"

"Oh, Carla. A friend of mine. Why? Got an office you want redecorated?" Muriel asked.

"This would certainly make me seriously think about it. So, what's this all about?" his father asked.

"Cutouts. We need somebody to buy up bank stock in three banks when they tank. Home money," Taylor said. "They just have to act as the agents for Home, without letting on that Home is doing the buying. The banks are dirty, and they're getting their funding through a private equity that's pumping the market."

"How many of these cutouts do you need?" the Prince asked.

"How many do you have?" asked Muriel.

"I can come up with about a hundred, without even having to call them and ask if they'd do it," the Prince said. "We were ready to do that with some companies when everything changed and this practical joker took over. Best thing he did was to chase them out of the country and seize their assets. I could reactivate them fairly quickly. And is talking to some of the rich and famous in this country going to bother anyone?"

"Yea," Ralph said. "Me."

Muriel just laughed. "Your Highness, this is Ralph Cramdon, Crown Special Investigator. Ralph, this is . . ."

"Muriel, you might as well just call me Paul. Same with you, Ralph. I'm out of the succession, and not doing anything formally, now. But a LOT behind the scenes," the Prince said. "Glad to know you, Ralph. I take it that you're new, and came up through the ranks, so to speak."

"More like grabbed off the street by Muriel," Ralph said with a lopsided grin. "Best day I'd ever had."

"Yea, she affects people that way," Paul said. "OK, where can we hold a conference with these people."

"The theater," Taylor said, immediately. "Are they trained, or will they need someone to pick them up?"

"They're trained, and they've all been to the theater at one time or another. You three get up there, and I'll call them in," Paul said, then exited.

"Let's go. Dad doesn't waste time," Taylor said, and they translated to the stage of the theater, and set up chairs and a podium. They had just seated themselves when the first of the people started trickling in through the doors.

As the stream increased, Ted came in and created a seat by Muriel. "You won't be going alone. I've discovered that I miss the excitement, too. Marcia and her crew even volunteered to turn their tunics blue so they could join in."

And then, Colonel Jackie came in. "Muriel, I've got two hundred of the Regiment available for you." And Taylor started laughing. "Quiet, you. You're only a King. I'm the Ambassador to Britain," she said, grinning. And that did it. Taylor doubled over, holding his stomach.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Paul, who came to the stage after the last of the group had entered.

"Oh, just a minor unannounced competition between Ted and the Colonel," Muriel said. "Ted felt I needed some extra support, and the Colonel rather trumped him. Then had the audacity to tell Taylor that he was only a King, and she was the Ambassador to Britain. Actually, I think he's taking it rather well. He COULD be grumbling."

"Oh, I needed that. Thanks, Jackie. That told me just where I stand," Taylor finally said, coming up for air. "You're right, of course."

"Thank you for the offer. We may just take you up on it," Muriel said. "That would cure the problem of moving people out of the building. I still need to get ahold of the Commissioner to let him know what's going down, and figure out where to store them."

"We'll deal, Muriel," the Commissioner said, coming in. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"SHEESH! Everybody's here," Muriel said. "It's nice to be popular." And Taylor started laughing again.

"OK everyone," Muriel said, standing up and taking the podium. "Here's what the story is. There are three dirty banks that are going to be cleaned up, whether they like it or not. Members of the Board of directors are also members of the board of directors of a private equity firm that's driving the stock market, to create the funds used in the dirty side of the business. We're going to take down the private equity firm by having it attack one of my computers. When that happens, we'll cut off all utilities and lock everyone inside in shields so they can't destroy evidence. Then, it's just walk inside and pick them up, and grab all the records and computers for evidence. That will give us part of the evidence we need against the banks. That's where you come in, and I'll turn this over to Ted to tell you how it works."

"Well," Ted said, taking her place, "it really isn't too complicated, and half the work will be done for us with the elimination of the private equity. With the elimination of the private equity firm, there will be less money coming into the banks, which will cause the investors to look elsewhere for what they feel they are entitled to. That means the price of the stock will fall. We just wait until it hits a certain point and start buying it up. When we do, we'll accelerate the fall in the price by reselling what we buy at a little lower price. Now, before you panic, the funds for this are coming from Home, not out of your pocket. You'll get a sheet of paper outlining what I've said, and the points at which to buy or accelerate the fall of the price, and then the point at which to hold it. You'll also get cards drawn on the Home banks we already own that will provide the funds for you. We've used this trick successfully in America to take over businesses and banks and pull them private. All you have to do is hold the stock and proxy it to Muriel, and she'll be the one to actually take over the bank. Don't expect to get anything back from the stock, as the company will be taken private when she takes over. But, like I said, you won't be out anything, and you'll be paid for your time and trouble. I've got members of my squads down here in the orchestra pit. They'll have signs indicating the initial letter of your last name. When this is over, just come down and pick up your materials, and we'll see you all on the other side."

Commissioner Smythe then took Ted's place at the podium. "In case you're wondering at what seems to be a 'Wild West' way of doing things," he said, "I was contacted by His Majesty about this. The private equity firm is using computers for fast buys and sells, which is against the law in this country. Ambassador Muriel has located the point of entry into the stock market's system, and will be intercepting it, there, with a computer of her own. People like this have no respect for others or their equipment, and she expects that her computer will be attacked at some point when it's realized that their sales aren't going through. That attack will constitute a computer abuse of a legally sanctioned computer under that law. And her computers bite. Whatever computer tries to invade hers will be 'smoked' I believe the term she used is. Basically, it will be rendered inoperative by blowing out it's circuits while leaving the hard drive intact. That computer attack will be the signal for the private equity to be shut down and raided, everyone inside arrested, and all computers and materials confiscated. I

will have buses outside as quickly as possible to transport people to their new homes,” which caused the crowd to chuckle. “And the actual raid will be conducted by the Crown Special Investigator, Ambassador Muriel, Ambassador Ted, and an elite team headed by Ambassador Marcia of the American Enclave, under our authorization and that of the Crown. Members of the Regiment of Home will be taking care of closing off possible exits and traffic control during the operation. So,” he added, “if you have funds in that private equity, now is the time to pull them out.” And this brought more laughter. “Your best bet will be to watch it on the telly. Don't try to come into the area to view it. The media has many more cameras and locations than you can cover, alone.”

Then Taylor took the podium. “I've been in raids, before, with Muriel. But this is the first one that I headed. I must say that it's an experience being involved in an investigation from the beginning and assisting in the planning of it. I never realized just how many details had to be covered for something like this. But my consort is an old hand at this type of action. There is a chance – a very slim chance – that the private equity won't try to attack her computer. In that case, we'd have to go in under probable cause, which would be backed up by the evidence her machine would give us as to the source of the buys and sells. From your standpoint, the effect would be the same. The raid would go down, and the stock price in the banks would begin to fall. I appreciate your willingness to help us settle these people that are funding terrorists and milking the people of Britain of their funds. Oh, and I have it on the authority of my legal team, Muriel's legal team, and Commissioner Smythe's legal team that our actions are within the law in all cases. So no one will be coming after you for your part. Thank you for coming, and come on down and get your materials. Then you can return to your homes.”

Chapter 16

The End of a Company

(Friday morning)

Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our regular broadcasting for this breaking news. At just before ten o'clock, we received word that there would be a disturbance at a location that turned out to be the home offices of a private equity firm that's well known in Britain. We take you to the scene, live, from our on-site reporter, Tim Hanks. Tim?

Thank you, Felix. When we arrived, we were gently pushed back by members of the Regiment of Home. They've cordoned off the sidewalk and a portion of the street. Foot traffic is being routed between the two rows of Regiment troops, and elderly, infirm and wheelchair bound people are actually being carried around the cordon by members of the Regiment so that the curbing wouldn't cause them problems. They appear to be very friendly and helpful . . . very polite and apologizing to the public for the inconvenience.

Shortly before this scene went live, we saw a number of people just appear in the cordoned area. Three wore blue tunics and cowboy hats. The tunics bore a strong resemblance to that worn by Ambassador Muriel, the King's consort, in that they were slightly iridescent and sparkled slightly. Others in blue were a bit more drab, but they, too, wore the cowboy hats. Following those were seven that wore red tunics that also were slightly iridescent and sparkled. We haven't been able to verify this, yet, but we believe that they may all be Ambassadors, friends of Ambassador Muriel, that constitute a rescue and recovery squad that's appeared in many countries.

OH! Now the sidewalk is being totally blocked on either side of the cordon, and Met buses are arriving. George? George, do we have a camera high, to see over the top of the buses? We do? Good. Use that camera, and I'll try to describe what I see in my monitor.

Nothing to see, yet. The entire building appears to be dark. Despite their using heavily tinted windows, I would expect to see spots of light from lamps and fixtures. But there's nothing. OH! Wait a minute. The members of the Regiment are changing their configuration. The pedestrian path has been eliminated, and an opening made in the cordon. Members of the Regiment are now lining the area between the opening and the entrance to the first bus. MY WORD! They're armed! What is going on, here? Now, people in handcuffs are being led out of the building, two at a time, by the ones with the red tunics. Oh! And as they reach the bus they are being met by a police officer before they board, the red tunics are returning to the building. Oh, my! They're being arrested! It's a steady stream of people being brought out in handcuffs. Again, those escorting them appear to be doing so very politely. Apparently, Americans aren't all rough and brusque.

The first bus has just left, and the stream of people held up, briefly. A second bus has taken its place, now, and the stream has resumed. How many people are IN there? What? Really? OK. Folks, we're going to take a short break for a special announcement, then come right back for more of the action. Ladies and gentlemen, His Majesty, Taylor, King of Britain.

"Hello. Sorry to disturb your programs. We got word that this company was trading on the stock market using computers to do the buying and selling. This has been against the law for five years, now, but never really enforced. I appointed a Special Investigator to look into the matter, and what you've been watching is the results of his investigation. This company is now closed, its records seized and its personnel arrested. I've been assisted by elements from Home in this action, as they were the only ones with the training and experience to perform this action without injury or destruction of the records. It would appear that three banks may have been involved in setting up and running this private equity firm, and they may be under investigation, next. Be advised that such blatant violations of the law regarding the use of computers will continue to be vigorously investigated and prosecuted. Thank you."

And thank you, Your Majesty. And there you have it, folks. The second bus has just finished loading, and a third has pulled up. The stream seems to be petering out. And yes, that's it. The last three were individually brought out, and they appeared to be fighting something. Astoundingly, the red tunicked people seem to be taking no notice of their belligerent behavior. All seven of the red tunicked people are now going back toward the front doors. OH! The three in the iridescent blue are coming out, and one of the red tunics is moving toward the woman in the center. And I think . . . yes . . . that's Ambassador Muriel in the center, and she's hugging the leader of those in the red tunics. Now, she's going to each of the others and hugging them. They certainly appear to be friends. And now she's waving at our cameras and grinning. WOOPS! They all just disappeared, and now the Regiment is disappearing. I guess that's it, Felix.

Thank you, Tim. We've received confirmation that those in the red tunics were the Rescue and Recovery unit of Home. The man on Ambassador Muriel's right as we looked at them was Ambassador Ted, the Ambassador to America. On her left was Ambassador Ralph, the Crown Special Investigator. We also understand that the hats they wore are not actually cowboy hats, though they're made by a company that specializes in such hats. These are actually a special design based on those worn by some State Police in America. We'll now return you to your regular programming.

And in Muriel's office, a crowd of people were laughing. "Really, Muriel," Mata said. "Did you HAVE to play to the cameras?"

"Why not?" Muriel replied. "They certainly knew I was there. And I knew they were there. Doesn't it make things a bit more personal for the people to be recognized and waved to?"

"Well, usually. But the camera you waved to was on a rooftop on the other side of the street," Mata said. "You wouldn't even have seen it, if you hadn't known where it was. Pure grandstanding."

"Nonsense, Mata," Muriel replied. "Oh, maybe a LITTLE over the top. But it let the media and their audience know that I was aware of their presence."

"Grandstanding," Mata responded. "Pure grandstanding. Next, you'll be kissing

babies.”

“Really? You think that would help?” Muriel said. The rest of the people in her office just laughed at the banter between the two stalwart friends – one an Envoy and the other a young woman.

“Give it up, Mata,” Marcia said. “She’s Muriel, and a force of her own. Always has been. She’s been setting style and breaking social rules from the time she was trained.”

“You got that right,” Mata said. “Acting out, outrageously, might be a better term for it. Ah, well, she always manages to come out on top, so maybe I shouldn’t complain. Why, I remember when”

“Oh, oh,” Ted said. “Mata’s about to show her age. It always starts with ‘I remember when’.”

“You should know, Ted,” Mata retorted. “You’ve been showing your age since you found her.”

“I HAVE NOT!” he said. “I’m just well preserved.”

“Yep,” Mata shot back. “Embalmed.” Which had the crowd laughing, again.

“Muriel, is it always like this when your friends get together?” asked Taylor, who was trying to stay inconspicuous in the corner.

“Mmm. Maybe more, now, than usual,” Muriel said. “We’ve been separated for a bit. So, this is a bit like old home week. So,” she said, changing the subject, “what’s going to happen to the building?”

“I’m buying it,” Ted and Taylor said, together.

“Huh?” asked Muriel. “How can you both buy it?”

“We’re not,” Taylor said. “The Crown takes it over as part of the penalty for having broken the law the way they did.”

“Nonsense. I’ve got something planned for that building. Something that I think Muriel has needed since you abducted her from her home,” Ted said.

“So, what would YOU do with it, Taylor?” asked Muriel.

“Probably resell it,” he replied.

“There you go,” Ted said. “So, I’d just buy it from you. At a discount, of course, since I’m a friend and would be paying taxes on it a hundred years in advance.”

"You forget that I know where you get your money from," Taylor said. "Fairy gold."

"Oh, nonsense. It doesn't disappear at dawn," Ted said.

"Oh? Sooner?" asked Taylor. And Mata hit the target again.

"THAT'S what this office has been missing," Muriel hollered, gleefully. "Mata inundating her computer monitor."

"Well, we'll have to do something about that," Ted said. "Taylor, what am I offered to take that monstrosity off your hands."

"What are YOU offered!" Taylor responded. "Why I'd just as soon see it torn down and turned into a parking lot. In fact, that might not be a bad idea. Parking in that area is abysmal."

"Seriously, Taylor," Ted said, "let's go someplace and talk about this."

"Oh, oh," Mata said. "Men getting together to talk, and they don't even have something to drink. This IS serious."

"Well, I still have the nagging feeling that we missed something in those offices," Muriel said. "Or at least SOMEWHERE in that building."

"So, you want to take another look," Mata said. "I don't see why you shouldn't. It's locked up, but we can translate into it."

"So, let's go," Muriel said.

"Mind if we come along?" asked Marcia. "Maybe we can help."

"Sure, if you want to. I always enjoy the company of you guys," Muriel said, and they all translated out.

On the first floor, there were offices around the perimeter, but the center was largely open space, given over to a large reception desk and numerous and dubious works of art, as well as awards from businesses. These were checked, thoroughly, for anything that might be hidden behind the framed documents or in the artwork. Nothing. In fact, the artwork wasn't even vaguely valuable, except to whoever had gouged the private equity firm for interior decorating. Offices were the same way. Most of the artwork, there, was the sort that one would buy in bulk from a standard business interior designer. In other words, crap. Second floor offices were less luxurious, and more functional, but still showed the touch of someone with absolutely no taste. And they were jammed together. Third floor was for the offices of the major heads of the firm, as well as a large conference room. An ill-positioned elevator and stairwell served as access between the floors.

"Is there a basement in this monstrosity?" asked Marcia.

"Yea, I think so," Muriel said, and they took the stairs down. Sure enough, there was one, given over mostly to dust, grime, and a generator over in one corner in its own room. Obviously, the basement had been used for storage, and the marks of file cabinets were all over the floors. But, other than the marks, the area was bare. The generator room had its own air supply and exhaust system, as well as a desk and rolling tool chest. On top of the chest were schematics for the generator and what was connected to it. And in a drawer of the desk was another set of what looked like schematics.

"Son-of-a-gun," Muriel said. "These are the connections to the banks, and to the stock market computers. This could shut down the stock market! They show where the connections were made INSIDE their building and directly to their equipment."

"That's nothing," Mata said. "The generator schematics show enough power for the offices and reception area. And one other area. What are we missing?"

"Their computer room?" asked Muriel.

"Nope," Marcia said. "Those were cleaned out right off the bat. No this is something else. Something in the walls, I think. Check for explosives!" And suddenly the building was flooded with Envoys.

"Got it!" Nancy said. "A tap off the computer room. Looks like a standard – well standard for Britain – wall socket. It goes into the wall and branches to the heating and air conditioning unit on the roof. There's three main places it goes to. One is the main floor offices, one is the second floor offices, and the third is the basement. Why the basement?"

"More important, what's it connected to?" asked Muriel.

"Gas," Betty said. "Cyanide gas. Controlled by the computers and, I'd bet, by the generator coming on. It was meant to kill all the little people. We're pulling the canisters out, now. And making a record of where they were. Taylor and Commissioner Smythe need to know about this. And whoever is investigating needs to find out who authorized the potential murder of everyone but the top tier in the firm."

"OK, I've tossed the information and the schematics to Ralph's squad," Mata said. "They'll look into it. And Ralph said 'thanks', and he'll pass the information on to Smythe."

"Good. So that's covered. Anyone find anything else suspicious?" asked Muriel.

"No," Marcia said, "but I can see a use for this building." And Muriel looked at her, shocked. "WHAT? You used to wonder what would happen if us friends decided to move away from Enclave. Then YOU went and did it. Jeff and Carla don't count. They're right across the street from your old office. And Fran, Don and Bobby need the extra space."

And Muriel didn't say anything. She just hugged Marcia. "It really isn't the same," Marcia said. "Despite the fact that we can translate. It really isn't. And where you are is

where the action is.” Muriel just hugged her harder. “Hey, kid. Did you REALLY think we'd put up with you deserting us for some guy? NOT going to happen,” she said, and returned the hug, feeling the soft sobbing of her friend.

“I tried,” Muriel's muffled voice came. “I tried so hard. And I did find things to get involved in. More training and getting people set up. Even that building for the destitute. But it wasn't the same.”

“Shh, girl. It's all right. We're here, and we intend to stay,” Marcia said. “Now, what's it take to become a British citizen?”

“You've already got it. Your Home passport,” Muriel said, sniffing. Mata handed her a handkerchief. “One of the things Taylor rammed through was that anyone with a green or red passport from Home had free access to Britain, and were to be considered as citizens.”

“REALLY!” said Marcia.

“Yea. Well, there's some enlightened self interest in it. They come here, they spend money here,” Muriel said. “But mostly it was because the Customs and Immigration, here, was trying to get us thrown out, again. Because they saw us as taking jobs away from British workers. That was because the unions were down on them to do it. BIG mistake, trying to get the King's consort thrown out of the country,” she added with a laugh.

“Yea. Really. Now, I wonder how we can get the building away from the boys,” Marcia said, and Muriel and Marcia grinned at each other.

Chapter 17

Beginning of a Building

(Friday afternoon)

“Carla! What are you doing here?” Muriel asked as she, Marcia and her crew, and Mata returned to her office.

“Oh, just thought I'd stop by,” Carla said. “Got a commission over here. Rather good one. So I thought I'd better get right on it. Cynthia can cover for me. Did you know? We think alike when it comes to some designs? Well, actually, MANY designs. But just enough different that many customers choose to go with her instead of me.”

“Jealous?” asked Muriel.

“Not a bit. I trained her, after all. Nope,” Carla said, “impressed. They are customers that wouldn't have been happy with what I suggested. But Cynthia keeps them in the Design Shop, and it all works out. Then, if I'm called away, she can cover for me, and vice versa. So, this time it's her turn. OH, I'm going to enjoy this job.”

“So, what is this job?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, some old building that's just become available. It'll all have to be gutted, of course. Maybe even torn down and rebuilt, depending on how bad the construction is. And how badly it was treated by the owners and the raiding party,” Carla said. Muriel and Marcia both looked at Mata.

“What are you looking at me for?” Mata asked.

“Well, we COULD think that it was because you might know something,” Muriel said. “You always seem to, you know.”

“I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about,” Mata said. “And *I* certainly didn't call Carla over. I've been with you the whole time.”

“Uh, huh,” said Marcia and Muriel.

“Honest!” Mata said.

“Uh, huh,” Muriel said. “And if we believed you were honest, we wouldn't be looking at you like this. You want to come clean, now?”

“Oh, good. You're back,” Taylor said, as he and Ted came in. “And just in time. Oh, Carla! It's on. We worked out the details. As soon as Commissioner Smythe releases it, you can do whatever you need to do. Just let me know what you need – building permits or whatever. I've got people for that. And Marcia, it should only be a few days. I KNOW how

Carla works. So just get with her about what you need, and the sort of decor you want.”

Muriel raised one eyebrow at Taylor and, without turning to look at her, said to Mata, “I owe you an apology, Mata. For once it wasn't your scheming. It was my consort's.”

“Ted was in on it, too,” Taylor said, defensively. “We thought it would be nice to have other friends around you. And Marcia wanted to be closer to you.”

“Marcia?” Muriel asked.

“My idea, Muriel. I asked Taylor if he could find me a place for my troops. And I asked Ted if he'd mind if I moved to Britain. It doesn't stop where we work,” Marcia said. “You know that. But it does put us where the big stuff happens – in other words, wherever you are.” Muriel looked back and forth between the three, then suddenly fled.

“Don't,” said Mata, when Taylor looked like he was going to follow.

“I agree,” said Marcia. “She's just overwhelmed, right now. She already knew that I wanted to come over to be with her. What she didn't realize was that there were others that wanted, just as badly, for her to be happy. To see her as just a young woman a long way from home, instead of THE AMBASSADOR or THE LEADER. And no, she won't 'come around' because there's nothing to come around to. Just an overabundance of emotion that she needs to clear and a lot of tension that just disappeared. She knows you both care. That's obvious from the fact that you two found a way to conspire together that was just obvious enough that she could now see what you were doing.”

“Taylor, how long before the building is released?” asked Carla.

“It shouldn't be long, now. Commissioner Smythe has got a team in there, tearing out walls and tracing circuitry and duct work. I'm afraid you'll have to pull it down,” Taylor said. “Marcia, I've contacted 'The Welcoming One', and they've got room for you and your squads. Suits on the top of one wing. And since it's owned by Home, well, you know the drill. Everything is free. Do your squads have the new passports?”

“Yep. Mata made sure of that when she invited me over to play with Muriel,” Marcia said with a grin, and Taylor chuckled.

“Yea, for her it IS play. I still can't get over how she does it, and I was IN on it,” Taylor said.

“Yea, and you contributed, and I contributed, and Mata contributed. Well, by now you can see the pattern. She draws on everybody, and refines it down as she goes along,” Marcia said. “It's that refining down on the fly that has everyone puzzled. It's like she's putting together a jigsaw puzzle where people are handing her the pieces. But some of them don't fit, and some of them aren't even a valid part of the puzzle. And she's able to distinguish between them and what WILL fit.”

"Yea. YEA! EXACTLY! But it's knowing what pieces will work that is the amazing part," Taylor said.

"Well, don't sound so surprised," Marcia said, as Muriel translated back to them. "You do it, too. It's just that your puzzle is politics, where hers is being an attack dog." Whereupon Muriel promptly said 'RUFF' and put her hands up, like a dog begging, and panted. Ted hit her.

"Marcia, I DO see one problem with you're being here in Britain," Taylor said. And Marcia felt a chill. "Your language. You really MUST learn to speak English. It has a particular rhythm and flavor, dontchaknow," he added in that fake upper crust accent. And Marcia hit him.

"I'll have you know that I speak English properly," Marcia said. "Not like you poor British that so torture the language that all meaning is squeezed out of it. How you people ever manage to get an idea across is beyond me. And as for humor, you wouldn't recognize it if it bit you in the ass."

"Au contraire," Taylor said. "Our humor is simply too refined for your taste."

"Refined is right. You refined all the taste OUT of it. It takes volumes of books just to describe what should have been a simple question. 'What is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?' has generated so much discussion that it's lost all meaning, yet I get the impression that you British would simply try to calculate how fast a dry gulp could go. REALLY! It's as bad as some of the philosophical questions that Thomas the Doubter comes up with. The question is indeterminate, due to the fact that the specific species of swallow isn't known, nor it's direction with respect to any wind, and the wind's velocity. Then, of course, there's the density of the air, moisture content, altitude above sea level . . .," Marcia rambled on, and was finally cut off.

"AAAAARRRRRRGGGGH! Don't start on that one. It was a MOVIE, for crying out loud!" Taylor said.

"Yes, and that's exactly what the audience should have been doing. Crying out loud," Marcia said. "How such a work could have become so popular is beyond me. I mean, really! The mixture of slapstick and bad puns and innuendos is worse than some of Muriel's humor."

"Hey, leave me out of it. I'm still trying to figure out something Jeff tossed at me – RFC 1149," Muriel said.

"WHAT?" asked Marcia.

"Oh, it's 'A Standard for the Transmission of IP Datagrams on Avian Carriers'," Muriel said, innocently.

"AAAAARRRRRRGGGGH!" Marcia screamed. "You just HAD to do that, didn't you? You couldn't leave it alone. You just had to try to out-do me."

"There is no try," Muriel said. "There is only do, or do not." And Marcia hit her. Ted simply and quietly curled up in a chair, holding his stomach and trying to control his silent laughter. "And he's no help at all," Muriel added, pointing to the Ambassador to America. "I can't get honest answers out of ANYBODY!"

"Um, Muriel?" Tommy said. "You DO realize that RFC 1149 was posted on April First of Nineteen Ninety, don't you? It was a joke!"

"Yes, but it was actually done by a group in Bergen, Norway, using pigeons," Muriel said. "At least, from what I understand."

"Well, to change the subject back to what it was, if I'm going to create this office for you, I'll need to find out what you want and what type of space I'll be working with," Carla said.

"And you're no help, either," Muriel said. "Kill-joy. This is the most fun I've had since I discovered a use for boys." And Taylor choked. Mata simply moved her cup further away. And poor Ted was beyond help.

"You know?" Marcia said, "I think you're right. It isn't so much the action I missed with you gone, as the outrageous humor that goes on around you. I think you've improved some. OK, Carla, let's find a place where we can plan this out."

"Well, if you ignore whimpering boy, over there in the corner, why not right here?" asked Muriel. "You can use the big screen to put up floor plans and whatever. Plus, you have the advantage of drinks and snacks available. Oh, and good company," she grinned.

"Can you behave yourself?" asked Marcia?

"Of course," Muriel said, primly. "I ALWAYS behave like myself."

"Breath, Ted. Just relax and let it flow through you," Fran said, translating in and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Slow, deep breathes, now. You really should know better than to stay around Muriel when she gets like this."

"ME! Marcia started it. Her and Taylor. I was just an innocent by-sitter," Muriel said.

"Uh, huh. You always are," Fran said. "And for your information, young lady, boys have lots of uses. They're admirable for putting up pictures, and reaching for things on the top shelves. And their ability to hold a couch from floating away is far and away their best feature. Easy, Ted. Just let it wash through you. Back to deep breaths, now."

"Good grief! A girl just can't have an innocent conversation without everybody listening in!" Muriel said.

"Of course not. There's always the chance that she'll say something intelligent," Taylor said. "And nobody wants to miss it."

“Just relax, Ted,” Fran said, again. “Should I take you back to your office so you can settle down?” she asked, and he shook his head 'no'.

Meanwhile, Carla uploaded the basic structure of the building to the screen in Muriel's casual area, and began laying out areas. Seven offices on the first floor appeared, surrounding a small space for reception. The second floor contained apartments large enough to be used by couples. The third was devoted to a large conference room and workspace for visualizing buildings. But the basement was the pride and joy. A 'playroom' that included a large screen theater, library, gymnasium for various sports or exercise equipment, and casual area for casual conversations or brainstorming. It was a big basement. It also included an area for the power converter for electricity, water, sewage and garbage disposal. That was a very small area, since the building was in no way as large as an Enclave. In fact, Carla put it in place of the generator room.

Then the work began, as Carla turned the floor plans into three dimensional views, and the Rescue and Recovery unit began picking out decor for their offices and apartments. Out came the 'books' of possibilities – images on her tablet of the various styles used in either office or living areas, to give the impression of what they would be like in actual office and living areas. Carla had learned from the mistakes of other designers. These weren't 'set pieces', but actually miniature areas that she had built, based on what real offices and living areas looked like. They also included images that 'real' offices and living areas traditionally couldn't produce, because they made use of Jeff's technology to create an outdoors, indoors or to give a more three dimensional feel to the walls.

“Carla, can I interrupt for a second?” Taylor suddenly asked.

“Sure. What's up?” Carla replied.

“Is there a way to save that image for me? We never did get together about my office,” he said. “And I've been thinking about something that looked a bit more solid. I know you did my office in a hurry, and I appreciate it. It's just”

“No problem,” and she made a note on her tablet, then started on. Their friends had also been making notes on their tablets as they went along, and shortly Carla reached the end of the possibilities. “OK, I've got the sizes of offices and apartments, and you've all been taking copious notes on styles. I'm going to start with the reception area, so you can see what that would look like, and how it would contrast with what each of you have for offices. Then we'll do your actual offices, and then on to your apartments. When we get to your offices and apartments, remember that flow is important. You want to be able to move around without banging into things, and you want to be able to project your image.”

And it began again. This time was much shorter, as Carla had an idea of what her friends liked, and geared the selections to those that would least conflict with their possible choices. “Now,” she said as she started, “realize that you've got space to display things in the lobby. Special artwork, awards that you've received, scenes of some of your spectacular missions, whatever. So think about it as you look at these.” And they did. And very shortly,

she was going through individual offices and setting them up in the configurations that her friends wanted. The apartments were easier, because they all opened onto a common hall. So it was just partitioning them off as her friends liked, and adding style to the walls and setting in furnishings. The top floor was left relatively bare. Relatively being that it had neutral backgrounds, and the only furnishings would be the conference area at one end. The rest of the space could be used to not only show buildings that they needed to enter, but surroundings. Some of their raids had included armed people hidden outside the buildings, and they had to be neutralized before taking the building. It was some of these representations that Carla was suggesting for the lobby.

“OK, Carla said. “I think we're ready for a first pass at this, as soon as the building is released.”

Chapter 18

Redecorating an Office

(Saturday afternoon)

“Ah, Taylor! You're here. Let's go to your office. You, too, Muriel,” Carla said. “I think I know what you're going to ask me, and the answer is 'yes'. You want something more substantial, like that desk in the one that you stopped me at. NICE choice, by the way. And yes, I can match furniture to it.” They translated out.

“Now, I am going to make a change to that mural on the wall, though, and change the arrangement of the furniture, some, so that it's visible to guests and visitors,” Carla said. “The one you stopped me at was eighteenth century Russian, by way of the Italians. And no, it wouldn't look out of place in this room. What it would do is dominate the room. It would say that you mean business. I'll make the mural full three dimensional, like Muriel's office, complete with animation. The only reason I made it like a watercolor, before, was because of the style of furniture we put in. This, though – this will go with anything you wear, from casual to full blown formal, complete with crown. It's a GOOD choice.”

“One question, though. Would you like law books on a sideboard? They don't have to be real, I f you don't like. But it might lend a bit more strength to your persona,” Carla said.

“Yes, I think so, if you don't mind,” Taylor said.

“You ever notice, dear, that she manages to run right over the top of people?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, nonsense. I saw what he wanted, and just wanted to assure him that it could be done,” Carla said. “So, first the mural. There. Now the casual area, like so. Now . . . do you need drawers in your desk, or just the facade of the desk. I can do it either way.”

“I don't really need the drawers, no,” Taylor said.

“Good. More leg room and less chance of you banging your knees getting in and out of it,” Carla said. “So, the side board – you did say that you wanted it, didn't you? - there, and the desk a bit in front. Chairs. How many for visitors?”

“Four, I think. I doubt that I'd have more than that at the desk. If it were more, then I'd use the casual area,” Taylor said.

“GOOD! Excellent. Your desk chair has changed, some, but only to fit the rest of the furniture,” Carla said. “It's still fit to your size, and still rocks and swivels. Same for your 'throne' in the casual area, but with the addition of a leg rest and the ability to recline, like so. How'm I doing so far?”

“My GOSH! Yes. Exactly what I wanted. You're a genius, Carla,” Taylor said.

"Of course. Now, Janice, I hate to disturb you, but I need to make changes there, too. A proper Russian secretary's desk and chair look. Oh, don't worry about anything on the desk," Carla said. "I can work around that, no problem. But it might be best if you stood up for a moment or two." And Janice quickly got up and moved away from her desk. The next moment it changed, and Janice gasped. "There. Now, it looks like the building was built around the furniture. Oh, so you don't panic, the figures now move. They'll move into the picture, have a picnic lunch, walk around, and exit the picture. All in somewhat slow motion, so people will have to look closely to realize that they've moved. I can give you a sped up version, so you can see what will happen, if you like."

"I think I'd like that. That way, I'm not surprised," Taylor said. "You've been working on this picture for a while, haven't you?"

"Yes. Ever since I saw you two together, and created the first picture, I've wanted to do one that went through a sequence of movements that would show you two together," Carla said. "So, I worked it out in my office, and showed the sped up version to Cynthia and Jeff. They were impressed, so I felt that it was adequate."

"Adequate, huh," Taylor said. "I'll adequate you! Good grief, Carla, you've outdone yourself! It looks like I could walk into the image. And the casual way that the figures appear to be toward each other. Does that hold up throughout the movements?"

"Oh, yes. I was trying to represent the feeling I get about you two. That you're friends that are comfortable with each other, rather than some 'flash in the pan' romance that can fade," she said. "I'm probably not saying it right. It isn't that it's not romantic. It's deeper than romance. And please don't walk into the image. It's no place that actually exists. It's more the idea of meadow and woods – a park-like quality."

"Does this picture make my butt look fat?" asked Muriel, ironically.

"MURIEL! Only you would come up with something like that!" Carla said, laughing. "After all the years you bemoaned the fact that you didn't have a figure, now you're upset by the possibility that you DO?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. Not upset. After all, I understand that there are men who LIKE women with fat butts," Muriel said. And Carla hit her.

Muriel just laughed and said, "Oh, good. I guess it doesn't." Which caused Carla to hit her again.

"Taylor, you have an appointment in about ten minutes," Janice said.

"Thanks, Janice. Which dunderhead is it this time?" asked Taylor.

"Plural, Taylor. The dunderheads representing the unions and the dunderheads representing the head of Customs and Immigration that you fired," Janice said, grinning.

“Did they, by any chance, bring their principals?” he asked, laughing.

“I'm not even sure they have any principles. Do lawyers have any?” asked Janice. “Seriously, sir, no they didn't.”

“Well, that can be remedied,” Taylor said, seriously. “Muriel, I have a hunch what this is about. If you and Carla aren't doing anything important, I'd love to have you both stay.”

“Now, THAT is a royal command if I ever heard one,” Carla said. “Where do you want me, Your Majesty.”

Taylor looked pained, then said, “Oh, I thought I should have the two women that are causing this minor battle to be on either side of me.”

“Taylor . . . it was a joke,” Carla said.

“Oh, I know. It's just . . . ,” and he paused. “Carla, you have no idea what it was like under my grandmother. And 'royal commands' were rarely issued, but when they were it was like the crack of doom. It wasn't that they were delivered harshly. They were 'oh, so proper' and a bit formal. But it always meant that someone was in trouble. And very often it was me.”

“Taylor, I'm sorry. That wasn't what I was trying to say,” Carla said.

“Oh, I know that. And I know it was a joke. It wasn't you. It was me, flashing back to that. I don't EVER want to be like that with my friends,” Taylor said.

“And you aren't. You're always just you. No, I'm not doing anything important, right now, and I'd love to be here,” Carla said. “I think I know what this is about, too. They're going to try to castigate you for using outside labor and management to build 'The Welcoming One'. They may have even gotten a rumor that I'll be working on the building that the private equity firm USED to own. And you want us – Muriel and I – to be able to face our accusers. That's all I meant by that comment. And, to tell you the truth, I welcomed it.” And Carla quickly moved to a chair at the left of Taylor's place in the casual area. Muriel took the one on the right, and Taylor remained standing in front of his.

“Janice, are they here?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. Shall I have them brought in?” she asked.

“Please,” Taylor said, and Janice punched a button on her intercom and spoke to HER secretary. Shortly, two men were admitted to the office, and Janice presented them to Taylor.

“Sit, gentlemen,” Taylor said, abruptly.

“Your Majesty, I think this would be better handled in private,” one of the lawyers said.

“Actually,” Taylor said, “I think this should be aired where the principals of BOTH sides are present. I notice that you didn't bring yours. Saul,” he said and sent, “would you be so kind as to have the head of the union and the ex-head of Customs and Immigration brought to my office?”

“Yes, sir,” Saul's voice came from the air. And suddenly, two more men were in the King's presence.

“Very good. Thank you, Saul,” Taylor said. “Sit down, gentlemen. Recently, there has been some agitation concerning my selection of an architect, and my admission of people to this country. The two concerns appear to be linked, in that the carpenter's union doesn't want people it considers foreign to be doing the work in this country, and have made their wishes known to the head of Customs and Immigration, causing no little trouble. Now, I'm going to make this as plain as I can. Persons known as Citizens of Home are NOT a threat to this country or its economy, despite what you may think. They are, and will remain, welcome in this country. They will not be subject to Customs and Immigration. In fact, it was your actions in defiance of our wishes that caused YOU, sir, to be summarily fired from your position. We do have that right, sir, to fire people for cause. And a direct violation of an edict, because you're being paid off by an organization or corporation, IS sufficient grounds for your dismissal. And yes, we have the evidence of such financial transactions. So, there will be no further discussion concerning the admission of Citizens of Home to this country. Is that understood?”

“But, Your Majesty, I don't think” a lawyer started.

“That's obvious. You DON'T think. If you did, you'd realize that you have been given a royal command. You will cease and desist from any action or attempted action in this matter. I'm being generous,” Taylor said. “You and your client could be in court facing the ruination of your careers and your financial situation. You could actually have to go out and work for a living, instead of feeding off the general public with your little legal games. The games have stopped. You claim that you have no understanding of where Home is, or what its political agenda is, and therefore you try to manipulate it. Well, your claims are unfounded. You've had ample opportunity to discover where and what Home is. You have refused that opportunity. Home HAS no political agenda. Home's concern is with ALL the people of the world, not just one nation, or even one segment of a nation. It is for that reason that you were ORDERED to accept them as having free access. Your client violated that order and was fired. If this goes to court, then I will see to it that you are ordered to restore the funds necessary to defend my position, as well as pay penalties for having brought a frivolous lawsuit, and anything else that I can think of at the time. You will find yourselves not only fired, but ruined and forced to actually do some work. And, since you aren't qualified for anything, you would most likely end up in the lowest paying jobs in the country. Your choice, gentlemen,” he said, addressing the ex-head of Customs and Immigration and his lawyer.

“And now for you two,” Taylor said. And you could almost hear the slamming of a coffin lid. “I have the right to choose my architect. It has been the practice, in the past, to try to choose someone from this country. It hasn't ALWAYS been the case that someone from this

country has been selected. Certainly, it is not a practice that is enforced on those from other nations. Yet, you've tried to do just that. You have tried to insist that a general practice, with no basis in law and only applicable with the monarchy, be applied to another nation. And that is a reprehensible attitude, and in direct contradiction of what has actually been the practice. You two have tried to dictate to me who I can select. Worse, you've tried to dictate to the Leader of a foreign nation who SHE can select. This is unacceptable. And your basis for such attempt at dictating to me was that it was taking jobs away from your union members. I've got news for you gentlemen. More of your workers are qualified to do the work that this architect proposed than you realize, and you have ordered them – ORDERED THEM – to not use those techniques. And the reason why is because of the kickbacks you get from your suppliers. This whole 'good old boy' bribery has ended. The techniques used by those trained by Home and its representatives meet or exceed all building codes. I know. I've looked them up, and I've seen the plans presented by the architect in question. Further, her training and education go far beyond that offered in the schools in this country. Gentlemen, I've seen the trash that current architects, following your dictates, have come up with. This young lady has managed to do remarkable things – things that you don't understand. Things that you REFUSE to understand because of your greed. She has managed to create wonders of buildings. Sometimes even doing them in accordance with local 'building codes' that should have been repealed two centuries ago, as is the case with 'The Welcoming One'. That she was forced to use labor from Home to do it is because of your restrictions on your own people. That ends. Now. I have a team working on nothing but the building code, trying to understand what you managed to push through a bought and paid for Parliament. Some of the practices in there are actually dangerous to the people. Particularly in the way they're applied in the field by your slip-shod methods of construction.”

“So, gentlemen, here's the way it's going to be. You're going to challenge me, in court, for having shut down your little game. And you'll fail, because what you're doing is actually harming the people of Britain for your gain. You can claim that what I've put in place aren't real laws, because they weren't passed by Parliament. But that won't fly, either. I have the right to say that people from another country are allowed free access to this country without going through customs or all that garbage. I also have the right to change licensing standards where it's proven that the 'new' methods are more effective than the old ones. And I definitely have the right to pick what architect I want to use. And attempting to dictate to the head of a foreign nation would simply get you laughed out of court. You created a mess. I'm having to clean it up. So, you'll fail, and it will cost you everything you own and have saved. Or . . . you can drop the issue, now, and never bring it up again. And I'll ignore all the money you've managed to come by, through your illegal means. You can live comfortably on that. Your choice,” Taylor said, with finality. “You're dismissed, gentlemen.” Saul's squad members showed up to take the union head and ex-head of Customs and Immigration back to where they came from, and the lawyers found their own way out.

“O-K. I take back what I said about a royal command. And Muriel thought that I ran right over people. That's as bad as Muriel's 'change or die' comments she made when she was twelve,” Carla said. “They're wrong, you showed where they were wrong, you gave them a choice. And that choice ranks right up there with 'I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse'. I like your style, man, and I REALLY hope that I'm your friend.”

Taylor just looked at her, then blinked a couple of times. "Oh . . . yea, you're a friend. You don't go around trying to screw everyone out of their hard-earned cash, and you give real value in everything you do. Plus, you're just nice to be around, Carla," he finally said. "Sorry. It takes me a minute to come down off one of those."

"Taylor," Muriel said. "How about we put a cap on this little episode? Why don't we call the media to put a camera on the roof across the street, again, to watch how a building is REALLY built. Once the structure is up and solid, we can even invite them in to watch the rooms being made and decorated."

"Carla?" asked Taylor.

"Fine with me. I'll even answer questions for them, when I'm not busy," Carla said. "Though I doubt that most people would understand the answers."

"Well, they might understand that, even though it LOOKS AND FEELS like wood, it's actually a shield that won't burn, won't collapse under weight, and can't be harmed by anything but a trained person," Muriel said.

"Yea, that I can show them," Carla said. "Glass is a good example of that. We don't use glass, we use transparent shields. Unbreakable. And REALLY bullet proof."

"Then, all we need is the clearance, and I'll see about getting the media there," Taylor said.

Chapter 19

A New Home (Monday afternoon)

"OK, Muriel, we got it," Taylor said. "Carla told me that if it was on for today, to let her know at about eleven o'clock. So she knows. I just told her. I've already alerted the media. In fact, Saul took a couple of the squad over and took the camera, camera man and equipment up to the roof. Last time, the poor guy had to carry it, himself. Temporary barriers are up, and will come down as soon as the new building is up, but before the floors are broken up into offices and apartments. And the Commissioner has some police out to keep people from walking in the street."

"You've been busy," Muriel replied. "I got with the building inspectors, and they'll have a TRAINED person on hand. He knows not to joggle Carla's elbow while she's working, but may ask some questions about the building after it's up. Oh, and we're going," she said, definitively. "We won't be doing any of the work, but we'll make it obvious that we're trained. So, dress fancy. Not formals, but at least your good outfit. You can even wear your cowboy hat, if you want."

"Well, she said she'd show up at twelve. I suppose we ought to get over there," Taylor said.

"Bring coffee. You had to have gotten her up at four o'clock, her time," Muriel said.

"Already covered," Mata said from behind her. "And WE know how she likes it. Oh, and the police finally had to shut down the street. The media let it out about what was going to happen, and half of London showed up. You'll have to come in from the air and make a space."

"Isn't there room for Carla in front of the building?" asked Muriel.

"Yea. It's kinda full, too," Mata said, grinning. "ALL of your friends are there. Marcia and her six because it's their new home. And the other five because they want to watch Carla work, and congratulate the R&R unit for their new offices and home."

::Gang,:: Muriel sent to her friends, ::we're coming in. Can you make space for us?::

::No problem,:: Don replied. ::Got a space for you and yours right in the center. Bring one squad each. We're in Fighting Class A's, in case you're wondering. Just ring the bell and come in from above. That way you'll be able to juggle to fit, if you need to.::

"OK, Mata. You and one squad. Taylor, grab a squad," Muriel said.

"No need. The Colonel and a squad are waiting for us," he replied.

"OK, we're going in airborne, and dropping into a slot in the center. My friends are all there, and made space for us. Let's go," Muriel said, and they translated out.

And in the air over the front of the building there was the sound of a bell, then the appearance of Muriel, Taylor, and their squads. Muriel waited a moment to give the squads time to see how they'd deploy and the cameras a chance to catch them in the air, then slowly descended into the spot. As soon as she landed, Carla grabbed her in a hug, then turned and hugged Taylor. Colonel Jackie just grinned. And in the crowd ahead of the friends and their squads, on the other side of the 'glass' barrier, Muriel could see people holding up phones, obviously recording the momentous event. And she smiled.

"We put up a glass-like shield, so people could watch from the ground. We never expected THIS crowd, though," Carla said. "And there's a camera on the roof over there. I was going over the materials used in the building, and showing the inspector how they're made, and that they're stronger than ordinary materials, and the on-site reporter has been watching it like a hawk. And so has his cameraman. Ted's back at Enclave, sleeping. He was in early, transferring the building over to us, and paying the taxes on it. So, we're about to demolish the old one, and raise the new one. Want to help?"

"Sure, if you want me to. What do you want me to do," asked Muriel.

"We all go up, and each take a line, and simply dissolve it, including the basement. We'll build all new, so there's no question of its being sound," Carla said. "Just tie into me, and I'll direct the whole operation."

"OK. Taylor, you game?" asked Muriel.

"Sure. I don't mind," he said. And seconds later fourteen people – twelve friends, Muriel and Taylor – lifted to a point above the front of the building, and it dissolved, back to front.

As soon as it was gone, they grounded and watched as about a hundred Envoys went to work. It took about a half hour for the new building to go up. And Muriel noticed significant differences between the new and the old. Less windows in the front, and what faced the street looked like white marble. Sliding doors were in front, and the entrance had two ramps, one on each side of the stairs. A close look showed that the ramps had some sort of mechanism to literally tow wheelchairs up the ramp, and control their descent. Then the fake glass barrier went down, and the friends and Taylor entered the lobby.

Some of the crowd also entered, enough to make the lobby rather full, but they endeavored to stay out of Carla's way. Instead, they would leapfrog each other in an effort to see her actually do the design of at least one office. In the mean time, Envoys were already roughing in the offices, stairwell and bathrooms. Carla's squad preceded her, and the floor was laid in a rich-looking and highly polished tan stone. Steel I-beams were encased in white marble columns that seemed to grow in one piece from plinth to capital. Gold decoration was then added as sculptures appended to the capitals. Muriel noted that there were thirteen columns, three rows of f, and one centered forward of the rest right behind the reception desk.

A closer inspection showed her why. Each column had a face on it. The faces of her friends. And in front, her face stared down at her, smiling her soft, compassionate smile. In gold.

Meanwhile, Carla and her squads were going from office to office, decorating and adding furniture. Each office had a glass wall in front of its principal's desk, and an opening in front of the security chief's desk. The rest of the office was walled, and housed the rest of the team and their break-room. Obviously, Carla had done her homework because the entire job was done in a half hour. Next to the opening, on the solid wall, was a plaque with the name, Ambassador status, and areas of expertise. Next to that were all the badges and awards that each of the team members had accrued, and each of THOSE was identical. Muriel quietly went around, looking at the offices, and adding the 'Home Special Investigator' badge to their awards. The badges held the additional sub-heading of 'Rescue & Recovery'. She was just finishing the last one, when she felt something hit the back of her head, lightly.

"GOOF!" Marcia said, and Muriel grinned. "Thought you'd put one over on me, huh?"

"Nope. Just making you legal, for a change," Muriel said.

"Yea, like THAT'S going to do it," Marcia quipped back. "That'll look nice on our hats, though."

"Kinda what I thought," Muriel said. "You and your team's have the sub-heading on them. But that doesn't stop you from doing regular investigations, if you feel the need. The sub-heading is simply because that's what you're called."

"OK, everyone. Time to go upstairs. Just line up over here, and I'll give you the image," Carla said.

And seconds later, they were on the second floor, the crowd left behind. Entrances were from the middle of the building, and there were eight sections. As they worked their way around the apartments, they realized why. The eighth one held the swimming pool.

The only common thing about the apartments was the casual 'living room' just inside the door. This acted as a stop for when they might have outside friends in, and didn't see the need to parade them through the entire apartment. Decor was as eclectic as the offices. And the only other common thing was that they could all be expanded, should team members take a consort, and eventually have children.

The third floor really wasn't much to see. One end held a conference table, round, and fourteen chairs. Obviously, Marcia respected the opinions of security chiefs. Each place had an embedded computer monitor. The rest of the room was well lit, but plain and with a neutral background. This was the 'war room', where models of target buildings and areas could be assembled and examined in detail. Likewise, three dimensional maps could be constructed to show traffic flow or lines of communication. Right now, it only held a model of this building.

Finally, everyone translated down to the community room in the basement. In one end was a wide screen movie screen with a massive sound system. It dominated the area,

isolated from the rest of the room, by sound baffle shields, so that sounds from either side of the wall couldn't affect the other. There was also a gymnasium and a casual area that could hold all the team members and their squads, as well as a community kitchen for get-togethers. And in the other end, the power converter that ran the entire building's power, and supplied water and removed sewage and garbage.

Back on the first floor, the team members were already ensconced in their offices, and squad members were taking turns manning the reception desk. And Commissioner Smythe was going from office to office examining the plaques and awards. He seemed both impressed and puzzled that ALL the team members were Ambassadors, but that some were only marked as 'Plenipotentiary'.

"Well, Smythe? What do you think?" asked Taylor.

"These awards . . . I don't know what to make of them," he said.

"Each member, individually, took and passed the requirements for the various organizations, and were found to exceed their standards," Marcia said, coming up behind him. "With the exception of the badge for the Rescue and Recovery unit. That's simply what we are.

"And they are all Ambassadors?" he asked.

"Muriel was the first of us. Then she brought us twelve friends to the American Enclave to show us what she'd been doing that kept her out of communication with us for two days," Marcia said. "And the next thing we knew, we were all trained. Ted made us Ambassadors to keep us safe from retaliation from elements of the government at the time. And shortly after, we were involved in various activities that cemented that designation. Over the years, many of us have found other things that interested us, so those are Ambassadors with specific areas of responsibility."

"And the badges? Is there, how you say, a new sheriff in town?" he asked.

"Commissioner Smythe, we're a resource, not a competition. We have investigatory abilities that are ancillary to our main job of finding people and things," Marcia said. But we don't act without the approval of the national authority. Usually, that also means the local authority. We're not here to do your job. We can help you, if you like. But our main job is to go in where there is a high potential of injury or death, and deal with the situation without triggering that potential. Come by, sometime, and we'll show you records of some of our jobs, so you can understand how we work."

"I'd like that. And you'd work with us?" he asked.

"Of course. You ask for help, and we'd set up between us what you needed. We don't arrest, as such. What we DO do is to bring people out, without any injury, and let the local or national police make the arrests," she said, "just as we did with the take-down of the private equity firm. We provide records of what we do and how we do them, to show what the

situation was that we were called in to deal with, and that it was done in accordance with the laws of the land. And we work in any country that requests our help.”

“I will definitely drop by, sometime,” Smythe said. “And can you train others in your techniques?”

“Yes. Initially, that meant being able to pass the grueling physical standards of the top special forces. We still maintain that, ourselves. But others have modified the requirements to make it possible for anyone of normally good physical ability to be able to handle the job,” Marcia said. “Most of what we do actually is done with Envoy techniques, and doesn’t require the high physical ability that the special forces use. Ask your SAS about us.”

“What about firearms?” he asked.

“We don’t use them. On the job, we don’t need them. And we handle arms proficiency in a different way. We don’t have or use guns at all,” Marcia said, grinning. “We don’t need them. We can even teach your people WHY we don’t need them, if you like. Would you like us to train up a squad in our techniques?”

“You’d do that? Your badge?” the Commissioner asked.

“Nope. Your people, your badge, your authority. We’d just show them how we work,” Marcia said. “Would you like to come to my office and discuss this? Now? Or any time, really, that we’re not out on a job. There’ll always be someone here to take a message.”

“My word. You really are going out of your way to be open and friendly about this,” he said.

“No reason why not. What we do is to reduce the chance of injury or death to either side, and let the law deal with the consequences,” Marcia said. “Adding more people that have the training to do that reduces the risk of injury to your forces, the bad guys, and the general population. We also find lost dogs and trinkets, or even lost people. That’s the ‘recovery’ side of what we do. We started out as hostage rescue, but that quickly expanded, and we’ve even helped fire departments to get people out of burning buildings and such. Basically, if it’s a puzzle or a dangerous situation, we – or the people we train – can go in and deal with the situation in a calm, methodical manner, and at a speed that just isn’t available to untrained people.”

“Of course, you take credit for any job you’re involved in,” he said.

“The red tunics,” Marcia said, and grimaced. “We do tend to show up. However, we don’t always use them. Mainly, they’re to keep people from shooting at us as we’re coming out. But, your job, your credit. We aren’t really in this for fame. We’re in this to save lives. Yes, we’re going to attract media attention. But we don’t seek it. And if it’s your people, then you get to decide what they’re going to wear.”

“Smythe.” Taylor said. “Marcia’s not used to the way we British beat around the bush.

And she's told you, she's not competition or trying to take anything away from you. In fact, just the opposite. She's offering to set you up with your own flying squad to handle emergencies. Or more than one, if you like. She works primarily on an international level. She also isn't a glory hound. I know a bit about her background. She's a cop. Intentionally so, by training and inclination. But more, she's out to see that no one else dies in the line of duty like her father did. She's not a Special Weapons and Tactical team, though she has some of that training. She's like Muriel – just a girl doing a dirty job because it needs to be done. And, like Muriel, teaching others how to do it so it looks easy. It isn't. The amount of work they put into a job is unreal. But the end result of all that work is that they're in and out, and no one gets hurt. Why don't you take her up on her offer and talk to her. Maybe get some of your people trained in her techniques.”

“Yes. Yes, indeed. I shall,” Smythe said. “Of course. Wonderful opportunity. I'll just go and see who might fit in, shall I.” and he wandered out of the building.

“Do you think . . . ,” Began Marcia.

“He plays the befuddled old man quite well, doesn't he?” Taylor replied, not expecting an answer. “He started doing that early in his career, so I hear. I've had occasion to see it in action before, though. And, unlike some of his detractors, I know what it means. He's thinking seriously about something, and needs time to get away and finish the thought. He'll be back to you, and probably with a challenge of some sort. Possibly some job that he doesn't feel he can handle without help.”

“Marcia, what about some sort of sign for the front?” asked Muriel.

“Oh! Um I don't know. Carla, do you have any ideas?” Marcia asked.

“I might. How about a large version of the badge Muriel came up with, and the words 'Rescue & Recovery' under it, centered over the door,” Carla said.

“Might work. 'Rescue & Recovery' in gold over a background that looks like our tunics?” Marcia asked.

“Might work. Something ornate, but easy to read. Hmm. OK, I think I've got it. And now I know where Ted got the font for the Home logo,” she said. “Something like this?” and her tablet showed the front of the building. The badge was in gold, white, and red. The banner under it looked sparkley in a subdued sort of way, and gold letters spelled out the name of the team.

“Yea,” Marcia said. “Like that. Would it look out of place or too garish?”

“I don't think so. Let's go take a look,” Carla said, heading for the front doors.

As they exited the building, two things were immediately apparent. The first was that the crowd hadn't dispersed – or else a new crowd had formed, blocking the street. The second was that they were applauding and cheering. They stepped down to the sidewalk,

then moved back through a crowd that parted to allow them room, turned, and looked up.

“Yea,” Carla said, laughing. “I think that’ll do.”

Chapter 20

Rescue and Recovery

(Tuesday morning)

“Excuse me, miss,” a voice said. “I’m looking for a woman named Marcia?”

The Envoy looked down at the wheelchair confined person and smiled. “I think that can be arranged. Just a moment, please, sir.” And about five seconds later footsteps could be heard approaching. “She’ll be right here, sir.”

“Hi, my name is Marcia,” she said to the man. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m not sure. Commissioner Smythe simply told me to report to you, ma’am,” the man said. And Marcia grinned. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Rob Howell. Had an accident a couple of years ago. Commissioner put me on desk duty after that. Too soft hearted to let me go, I guess.”

“Well, well, well. Your Commissioner has a sense of humor. Challenge accepted. So, let’s see what we can do for you. I think the first thing we need to do is see if you can pass the physical,” Marcia said, laughing. “Come. Right this way. I WOULD pick the very back of the building for my office. But it really isn’t that far. Now, Rob, I’m just Marcia. We don’t have rank in this unit, because we all take showers. And we don’t use our last names or titles, because we want people to see us as friendly. To give you an idea of how laid back we are, one of our team is a philosopher. And we have resources, and that’s what I’m going to call up, first. Right in here, and I’ll see if I can get hold of a friend of mine.” ::Fran, I hate to wake you, but I’ve got a dilemma::

Marcia took her time walking around her desk and sitting down. “What? Who? Where? OH!” Fran said, translating in. “Commissioner Smythe, huh? Well, let’s see what we have. Uh, huh. OK, this is going to go easier if we can have you lay down flat. Oh, sorry. My name is Fran, and I’m a doctor. And we’re about to shove your Commissioner’s challenge back in his face. No, you don’t have to do anything. We’ll do it all. You just relax. Marcia, call the Commissioner and tell him that this will take a few days to research out. It won’t, really, but this man will need some time for recovery and rehabilitation.”

“Then you think . . . ?” Marcia said.

“It means extensive rebuilding. Can we give . . . oh, jeez! I don’t even know your name,” Fran said.

“Rob Howell, ma’am. Are you really a doctor?”

“Yes. Envoy style medicine. No cutting, no embarrassment. Just get in and get the job done. Ever work on cars, Rob?” she said, transferring him to a gurney by simply using shields to lift and straighten him out. “Well, what I’m going to do is much like rewiring a car.

You may feel a twinge or two at first. After that, it should be thoroughly boring.” Six people were gathered around the gurney, now, and a seventh stood back where he wouldn’t be in the way, but could watch.

“Now, how did this happen?” asked Fran.

“On duty, chasing a robber. He turned and hit me with something, and I fell back, right over something behind me. Felt a sharp pain, then couldn’t feel my legs. UH!”

“Sorry, that should be the last pain,” Fran said. “Now, would you like to sleep through the rest of this? There really isn’t anything to see or hear. And it would make it easier for me if you were relaxed.”

“Um . . . ,” Rob began.

“Right. You don’t know me enough to trust me. Well, don’t be upset if we DO bore you to sleep,” Fran said, grinning. “Mark, can I put you to work? Helping me sort them out.”

“Maybe. But there may be an easier way,” Mark said, and she looked up at him. “Go deeper, and let HIM do the work. He’s not trained, Fran. Chances are, he won’t even know until he IS trained. It can help his muscles, too. Minor atrophy, not atypical, and a certain amount of loss of muscle tone. In all, he’s in pretty good shape for the amount of time since the accident. A little re-familiarization afterward, and he should be good to go.”

“You’re kidding! Never mind. You NEVER kid. OK, let me see what I can do.” And she went silent for a minute. Then smiled. “Mark, I’ll never doubt you again. Until the next time.” And Mark laughed. “By the way, thanks for showing up. I’d have tried to do it the hard way.”

“No problem, Fran. Truth? I wasn’t sure, myself. But I felt it was worth a try. Marcia, you have a gymnasium, don’t you?” Mark asked.

“Yep. We can transfer him as soon as Fran’s done with him,” she replied. “How long?”

“Maybe four days. Less if he’ll accept the training,” Mark said. “He could pull an Anna and speed heal his body, that way.”

“Ahem. May I ask what you’re talking about?” Rob asked.

“I’ve started a process of healing you that should be finished in a few minutes,” Fran said. “We were talking about the recovery time to get you back in shape. The training we’re talking about is the basic Envoy training. Your recovery time could be reduced, then, because of techniques that Ambassador Anna of Russia came up with.”

“Oh. That. I’d been thinking about getting it. Then got hurt, and it seemed pointless,” Rob said. “And what do you mean ‘healing me’? OUCH! What was that? I’ve had some phantom pains, before, but that felt exactly like having my socks bunch up in my shoes!”

"On it," one of Fran's squad said. "Yep. Checking the other one too. Better now?"

"Yea. The pain's gone," Rob said. "What happened?"

"One of your socks had a fold in it, and it had been that way for a while. I just eased the bruising away," the Envoy said.

"Wait a minute! I haven't been able to feel my feet for two years!" Rob said.

"Well, obviously the healing is working," Fran said, "because you're feeling them now. And moving them some. Lie still. Nearly done."

"You're"

"Healing the nerves. Yes. And yea, I know it can't be done," Fran said, grinning. "Except that it can. I'd like you to do a couple of things for me. First, move your right foot. Just wiggle it. Good. Now your left. Very good. Now lift your right knee a little. Now your left one. Excellent. So, you said you'd considered getting trained. Why didn't you?"

"No time. I was going through school – well, the academy – at the time, and then was involved in learning the streets. It happened my second week out," Rob said.

"Well, would you like the training, now?" asked Marcia.

"Yes, of course. But the training stations are closed, and the Enclave is too far for me to get to," Rob said.

"You're looking at a room full of Ambassadors and Envoys, in a building filled with even more Ambassadors and Envoys. And all of us Ambassadors were trained by the same person – Muriel. Not only that, WE were expected to train others. I think we can manage, if you're interested," Marcia said, grinning.

"You're kidding! But . . . I'm crippled!" Rob said.

"Doing pretty good for a crippled man, then," Fran said, "since you're sitting up."

"I'm . . . oh, my gosh," Rob said.

"So, let me tell you a little about Envoys," Marcia started the litany. And five minutes later Rob asked to be helped down. Then took his first steps in two years.

"OK, I'm a little shaky," Rob said.

"We expected that. You connected to your soul well. Now, I'm going to pass you the method that Anna used to build up her body," Marcia said. "Just pass it on through to your soul. There. Now, this is going to sound funny, the first time, but trust me, it works. Reach

deep into your soul and ask it to help you build your body back up.”

And Rob's body almost glowed from the power that his soul drew. But suddenly, he stabilized, and stood up straighter. “Whoosh! OK, that was something,” he said, then tried a few more steps. In moments, he was walking nearly normally. “I never thought I'd be out of that wheelchair. My wife is going to be surprised by this. Oh, boy, is she going to be surprised.”

“Fran, thanks for coming. Sorry about calling you out so early,” Marcia said.

“No problem. I'm glad you did. I learned something new, today,” Fran said. “This should make helping people a LOT easier.” And she and her squad translated out.

Marcia looked at Mark. “I've got enough Envoys trained to cover for Fran until she catches up on her sleep,” he said, smiling. “I learned something that I should have realized years ago with Muriel. You people just don't know when to quit, do you. You take on impossible tasks and find a way to do them, anyway.”

“Yea, you might say,” Marcia said. “So, now we need to finish him up.”

“Yes. And I'm offering my services in that regard,” Mark said. “Let's get his shield up and solid, and get him dressed comfortably.” And the training went on. By noon, Rob's training was completed, he'd been to Home and back on his own, and gotten his passport and battlefield first aid course. He'd also gotten a refresher course in British police procedures the way the Metropolitan Police did them, and the course in Rescue and Recovery that had been pared down for those without the physical ability of a US Navy Seal. And he was hungry. An hour of exercise and speed healing did that to him.

“OK, we're not turning you loose until we know for sure that you're going to be all right,” Marcia said. “So, lunch here. And I'd suggest something substantial to help your body catch up with what your soul did in healing you.”

“Here?”

“Yep. I've got a chef on my squad that rivals the best in the American Enclave. He can come up with just about anything anyone could think of. How does steak and eggs sound to you?” asked Marcia.

“Wonderful. But . . . ,” he started.

“Good. We often eat in the office. Part of what the casual area is for. Just grab a seat, and I'll put in an order for you. May I suggest milk instead of tea?” Marcia said. He agreed, and shortly their meals were on trays locked to their seats.

“Now, were you intending to go right back to your office, today?” asked Marcia.

“I don't know what I was intending,” Rob said around a mouthful of steak. “I never

expected any of this. I had no idea why the Commissioner sent me here.”

“Oh, that's my fault,” Marcia said. “I rather challenged him to put our team to the test, and to get people trained in the Rescue and Recovery side that we do. He countered my challenge with one of his own. You. Well, we rescued you, and you're well on the way to recovery.” And Rob laughed. “So, I think it would be best if you didn't go back, today. Wait for tomorrow morning and just show up for work. Without the wheel chair. Just casual, like nothing had happened, and it was all in a day's work.”

And Rob laughed harder. “That's”

“That's mean,” Marcia said, grinning. “Yea. Blame Muriel. It's all her geological rift”

“Geological rift? OH! Her fault. UH! BAD,” Rob said.

“Yea, I know. Americans are like that,” Marcia said. “And like I said, it's all Muriel's fault.”

“What are you blaming me for, now?” Muriel said, coming into Marcia's office.

“Bad puns. And not giving up in impossible situations,” Marcia replied.

“So, what impossible situation did you casually take care of, this time?” Muriel said. Marcia just pointed to Rob. “Oh, I'm sorry, I'm Muriel. I don't believe I caught your name.”

“Rob Howell, miss. And you're the one that Marcia keeps talking about?”

“Guilty as charged. Though I don't know why. She's done more than I have, in some ways,” Muriel said.

“Girl,” Marcia growled. “Now introduce yourself properly, so the poor man can get over his shock all at once.”

“Oh, dear. OK, My name is Muriel White, but I never use my last name. I'm the Leader of Home . . . ,” and she went on through the titles, ending up with, “. . . and consort to King Taylor.” And that did it. “Now, calm down. You've heard the worst,” she went on. “Now for the best. I'm just a woman. Nothing really special. Just someone that does a job.”

“But”

“But nothing. Just an ordinary girl with friends,” Muriel said. “And Fran said she'd been in on something spectacular, here, so I thought I'd come over and find out what.”

Rob gulped, then pointed to his wheelchair. Muriel looked, then REALLY looked at Rob. “Speed healing? And I'm interrupting your eating? Oh, gad, I'm sorry. Go ahead. If you're anything like Anna was, you'll need it all, and maybe more. Marcia, YOU tell me about it, and let this poor man eat.”

“Broken back. Two years ago. I called Fran, because I knew that none of the doctors we have could handle it. Yet. I bet they're going over what was done right now,” Marcia said, smiling. “Mark came along, too, and between the two of them they got him up on his feet for the first time in two years. Now, he's fully trained, and got the Rescue and Recovery course, too.”

“OH, MY!” Muriel said. “Smythe isn't going to believe this.”

“Believe what?” asked a male voice. “So this is where you took off to, after lunch.”

“Taylor, we're about to pull a fast one on the Commissioner,” Muriel said. “You remember how he was grilling Marcia, yesterday? He sent Rob Howell over. Broken back, unable to walk. Now, he's trained and healed. Fran pulled speed healing on him.” And Rob just sat there in shock, afraid to move.

“WELL! Congratulations, Rob,” Taylor said. “I'd say that that qualifies you to stop being in shock and become a friend. My friends call me Taylor.”

“The Commissioner is NEVER going to believe this!” Rob said.

“He'll have to, when you walk into the office,” Marcia said. “I just wish I could be there.”

“Maybe there's a way,” Muriel said, and her face took on it's 'I know what you're thinking and you're not going to get away with it' look. “Wait for it,” she added, laughing.

Chapter 21

Challenge Accepted

(Wednesday morning)

“Good morning, Commissioner. Did you manage to send someone to Marcia to train?” asked Taylor.

“Well, I did,” Smythe answered. “Didn't he get there? Rob Howell. I thought he'd be the perfect one for you to train.”

“Really? Well, a man DID come to the office. The Envoy on the reception desk told me that he was in a wheelchair,” Marcia said. “Was that who you meant?”

“Yes. Poor man. Two weeks out of the academy, and he was paralyzed,” Smythe said.

“Strange candidate for training, don't you think?” asked Marcia. “I mean, my team and I all trained up to US Navy Seals standards. You send me a man in a wheelchair? Is he even a part of your force?”

“Yes, well, we've kept him on a desk, here. I just thought maybe there was something you could do,” Smythe said, dejected. “He married my daughter, you see.”

“Uh, huh,” Marcia replied. “Challenge accepted.”

“Morning everyone,” a voice rang out.

“Morning, Rob. How are you doing?” Marcia said.

“Still a little shaky, but MUCH better. Morning, Commissioner,” Rob said. Smythe just stared.

“Commissioner? Are you all right?” asked Muriel. “This IS what you wanted, isn't it? He should be up to full strength in a few days. Maybe beyond. We really ought to let him work with the Rescue and Recovery team for a while, to help him build up his muscles.”

“This It can't be!” he said.

“Oh, I'll admit, it took a while. I had to wake up a friend in America to do it,” Marcia said. “But it worked out pretty well. He's trained, now, in the basic Envoy techniques plus a few additions. And I gave him the Rescue and Recovery course.”

“Rob? You're”

“Walking. Yes. I know. Tomorrow I'll be running. Under supervision, of course,” Rob said. “I will say that your daughter had a bit of a shock when I walked in the flat. No more

struggling to get me up the stairs. No more feeling sorry for me. It was wonderful.”

“And you gave him the course?” Smythe asked.

“Yep. Well, actually, we gave him the full course, and marked the areas that didn't require the high physical standards. Most of it, as a matter of fact,” Marcia said. “But increased physical ability can help with stamina, and sometimes that's important. If you don't mind, we'll keep him for a while, then he should be able to train anybody else. He may even go on jobs with us, depending on what comes up. In the mean time, it'll keep my troops entertained helping him to reach new abilities, and learn about what Rescue and Recovery is all about.”

“You don't mind, do you, Smythe?” Taylor asked, pointedly. “I mean, after all, it IS why you sent him to Marcia, isn't it?” The effect was that of a royal command.

“Yes, yes. Of course. Whatever you people think best for him. Rob”

“It's all right Commissioner. I'll admit that I was puzzled as to why you would send me there and just tell me to meet someone named Marcia,” Rob said, grinning. “She just took one look at me and said 'challenge accepted', and went to work.”

“I'm beginning to think that I should have been the one going over to her office,” Smythe said. “Maybe she could come up with ways to help improve our standard police procedures.”

“Well, we did get the US Secret Service, FBI and state police procedures that use Envoy techniques. I'd be happy to show anyone that you send,” Marcia said. “Oh, and we could give them to Rob, too. Mostly, like the State Police officer said, it's how to duck,” she added, laughing. “But really, there are times to stand up and take someone shooting at you, and times to figure out how to take them out without their firing a shot. And those can be very helpful.”

“There's also how to amplify your voice to be heard over a crowd,” Muriel said. “And other techniques that we've developed over the years.”

“Just think, Smythe,” Taylor said, “in many instances, one person could take the place of a dozen that way.”

“All right,” Smythe said. “I can see that. You've got Rob for as long as you need, to get him up to speed. And I'll see how I can juggle things to get some other people over to you. It might mean that I'd have to call on you for help if an emergency comes up.”

“Feel free, Commissioner,” Marcia said. “It's what we're here for. And thank you. Rob? Ready for being tortured some more?”

“YES, MA'AM!” was his enthusiastic response. And Marcia and Rob translated out.

"You know, Smythe, that was a nasty trick to play," Taylor said.

"Yes, I suppose it was. But the way Marcia went on about how much she and her team could do . . .," Smythe started.

"No, no. I mean to Rob. If Marcia had had to turn him down, it would have crushed him," Taylor said. "As it was, she just put another notch in her belt. She and Fran, the doctor from the American Enclave, both managed wonders. And risked a lot, doing it. But they felt the need and found a way. It certainly was the most extreme form of 'rescue and recovery' that she's ever had to attempt."

"You're saying that by challenging Marcia, I could have hurt Rob, seriously," he said.

"Yes, you could have," Taylor said. "But it turned out all right, so I doubt that it will count against you. The outcome of this was out of your hands by the way you handled it. There were better ways it could have been done, without risking Rob in the process. Just calling Marcia and talking to her about it would have helped. She probably STILL would have had you send him. But the risk, then, wouldn't have been yours."

"Point taken, Your Majesty," Smythe said.

"Good. Well, I'm glad this worked out so well for both you and Rob, and your daughter," Taylor said. "We'll get out of your hair, now, and let you get back to work." And Taylor and Muriel translated out.

And, back at Marcia's office, Muriel said, "So, how IS Rob doing, really?"

"Very well," Marcia smiled. "He even got in a bit of extra exercise last night."

"Um, I'm not sure I should hear this," Muriel said.

"He chased his wife around the kitchen table. He said that they were both laughing so hard that they finally just went to bed and went to sleep," Marcia grinned, evilly. "Thought I was going to say something else, didn't you. But the reality was that he can't run that fast, yet. So she was able to keep away from his tickling her. The way he described it to us, it was like a slow motion game of 'keep away'." And Muriel busted up laughing.

"Seriously, though, he's pulling an Anna, but at a slower pace. He's improving steadily, and building confidence in his movements as he goes," Marcia said. "And the gang are having fun working with him, keeping him focused, and keeping his humor up. When he starts tiring, they bring out the 'war stories' of some of our 'adventures' from when we were kids, and just following you. They've even brought out the records of the events and played them for him in the theater, downstairs. That's when he actually realized who we were."

"Oh?"

"Yea, he had a set of those action figures, but never connected us, now, to the twelve

year old us, then,” Marcia explained. “So, one of the gang brought out a set, and proved it to him. The figures are twelve year olds. But the pictures of us were at sixteen. You thought he was impressed with your titles, yesterday? He was even more impressed that you were the same girl as the twelve year old that had instigated all those outrageous things, and survived being shot at and blown up so many times. And still thought that you were just a girl doing a job.”

“Oh, gad. You mean I've got another one to try to bring down to earth, so I can get off the pedestal?” Muriel asked.

“Nope. Don came over in the late afternoon, and made like the enraged consort. And hit him with his bat. Well, you know how well that works on a trained person,” Marcia said. “They ended up laughing about the bat hanging in mid-air over his head, then Don introduced himself, and Rob totally got it that THIS was the boy that the book said was a Trainer, Troublemaker, and Bat Boy. Don spent an hour with him, getting him to know that he could do outrageous things, too, then showing him part of one of his history displays.”

“You mean that he always thought that we were fictitious?” Muriel asked.

“Apparently. Not any more, though. AND, he realizes that you want him to just call you Muriel. That's when he really got behind this morning's demonstration. He spent the rest of the day working VERY hard at getting ready to 'just walk normally',” Marcia said. “I thought he brought it off pretty well, too.”

“I'll bet he's eating like a horse, now, too,” Muriel said.

“Yep. Charlie and Sammy go home with him, and make supper for him and his wife,” Marcia said. “AND make sure that there's high protein snacks available for him during the night. We've told him that that WILL taper off after a while. But right now, he needs it. And Sammy was the one that thought of doing it. And, well, you know Charlie.”

“Yea. He's been after her for five years. Does she even know?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, she knows. She's pulling a Muriel on him. Making him grow up, first,” Marcia said, laughing. Muriel just grinned and hit her.

“Hey, don't knock it,” Taylor said, also laughing. “It worked on me. You know what they say about men and women. He chases and chases her until she catches him.” Whereupon, Muriel hit him. But then she was laughing, too, when she did it.

“Is this a private party, or can anybody hit him?” Anna asked, translating in.

“You're out of uniform,” Taylor said.

“Of course. I'm playing the civilian for a while,” Anna said, showing what her figure was doing to totally overwhelmed jeans and blouse. “So, what's going on?”

"New trainee, downstairs," Marcia said. "He USED to be a paraplegic."

"Oh, Fran was telling me about that. Said that she wasn't sure she could heal him until he hollered OUCH, because one of his socks had a wrinkle in it that was pinching his foot," Anna said.

"Yea, well now he's trying to build himself back up," Marcia said.

"Speed healing?" Anna asked.

"Yep. Using a slower version of your technique," Marcia said.

"Would I be interrupting if I met him?" Anna asked.

"I can't see why. Right now, he's doing it in short spurts, just trying to get his muscles back to normal," Marcia said. "So, he takes frequent breaks to let his body catch back up. Sammy's down there, so he must be decent. Come on, I'll take you down." And the four of them translated to the gym area of the basement.

"Oh, MY! NICE area down here," Anna said, and Rob looked around from the treadmill he was on, stumbled, and four people grabbed him with shields to keep him from falling.

"Sorry. My fault," he said. "When I heard the strange voice, I looked around and realized that I'd fallen into another set of action figures. You ARE Anna, aren't you?" he asked.

"Anastasiya Khmelnytsky," Anna replied.

::Oh, oh,:: Muriel sent to Taylor. ::She used her FULL name. Either she's growing into her 'princess' name, or she's just growing up and likes what she sees.:: Taylor snorted.

"Ambassador Khmelnytsky," Rob said, bowing.

"And now you know why I only ever use my first name," Muriel said. "Quit showing off, Anna. You'll confuse the poor man into thinking you're someone important."

"AW, SHUTE! You go and ruin all my fun," Anna said, and giggled.

"Uh, huh. He's married. And his father-in-law is the Commissioner of Police. And trained. Want to try that one again?" Muriel asked, grinning.

"And here I was going to play the regal Russian Princess, just to see if I could pull it off. Really, Muriel, one would wonder if you were EVERY young, yourself," Anna said. But Muriel could see that she was examining Rob closely. Unfortunately, so could Rob, and he blushed.

"I'm not pulling this off very well, am I. Sorry Rob. What I'm doing is checking to see how much damage there is, and how much may be caused by the speed healing," Anna said.

"I'm not playing the coy girl out to embarrass a man. Really. Fran did a nice job on you. Or allowed YOU to do a nice job on yourself, anyway. Still some muscle mass missing, and some stretching that needs doing. Marcia, this is not your fault, but your program is meant for someone that starts with a fully working body from the beginning. His wasn't. Yes, he'd build strength, and you've done wonders in that respect. But he'd end up with gaps in what he could do, because it isn't even. And this is something that I discovered only AFTER I let out how I gained strength so quickly. Marcia, would you mind my helping? And you, Rob? Can you take suggestions from a woman?"

"What did I miss?" asked Marcia.

"Under normal circumstances, nothing. But, as both a dancer and a rider, I began to realize where the gaps were in my training. Balance," Anna said. "Bulk muscle tries to overcome this by powering through. A dancer can't do that. He or she would fall over in some of the moves I use. It can be overcome by using shields and 'flying' through the moves. And if you do that, it shows up in a routine. So, I don't. Which means that I had to learn how to get the muscle groups that are only ancillary to a move strengthened, too, to maintain balance and control. Rob, walk over there and back, please?"

Rob did as she asked. "See?" she asked, as he started back. "He's fighting to maintain control, but the muscles that would balance him haven't developed to do the job. This will affect his ability to run, too. We can fix this."

"Anna, not to sound negative, but is this really necessary?" asked Marcia.

Anna squatted down in the position for the more famous Cossack kicks, and simply held position as if she were glued there. "Try holding this position, Marcia. Don't even try the kicks. Just hold this position for one minute. You'll see what I mean." Marcia tried. And nearly fell over three times.

"OK, I begin to understand," Marcia said. "Are you saying that control is more important than strength?"

"Maybe, but not really. Strength without control can lead to mistakes in movements. Strength WITH control becomes an unconscious action that can keep you stable in all situations," Anna said. "Yes, strength is important. But balance is just as important. For him, more than for you, right now, simply because he lost a lot of that in his paralysis. I'd like to give him back AT LEAST the balance he had before the accident. More, if he wants it. Oh, I won't try to make a dancer out of him. But he will learn some of it, simply because dancers use more extreme moves than most people, and it's exploring those edges of the range that the balance really show up."

"What you're saying is that most people use force to try to overcome a lack of balance," Marcia said.

"Well, something like that, anyway," Anna said. "I don't think it's quite as simple as that. But the end result of watching the balance, too, is that you can relax into a balanced position

because you're not constantly having to correct."

"Can it be taught?" asked Marcia.

"To a degree. Mostly, it's just learned. But you can be taught to learn, if you understand what I mean," Anna said. "Mostly, it's just being conscious of what groups affect the balance, and stretching and strengthening them. I can help him find the ones that will let him walk, run, jump and such, naturally."

"Can you teach ME?" asked Marcia.

"Oh, sure. Same thing, really. Just learning to relax into it, and know what you're doing, and letting your soul understand it," Anna said. "Then it becomes natural and instinctive."

"Well, I don't know about Rob," Marcia said. "But I'd like to learn. Muriel talked about control, once before, but I didn't really understand what she meant. I think I'm beginning to, now."

"You're saying that it could help me feel like I was moving normally?" asked Rob.

"Yes, of course. You wouldn't just feel like it, you would BE moving normally," Anna said. "Perhaps with a bit more grace, but most people wouldn't notice that as much as they'd notice a certain self-confidence in your movements."

"Then I, too, would like to learn," he said.

Chapter 22

A New Beginning

(Wednesday afternoon)

“OK, why don't we start with some hydration,” Anna said. “You've been working hard, and could use the liquid to replace what you lost.” and she moved toward the kitchen area, building a table and chairs as she went. She sat down, and placed folded paper towels at each place except hers. “Here's the challenge,” she said, as she created the beverages of their choice. “Pick them up and drink without spilling them,” and she pointed to Marcia, first.

Marcia looked at the coffee mug in front of her, then looked at Muriel. “YOU BEAST! You've been doing this all the time. YOU KNEW!” and the table cracked up. ALL of the mugs were filled to the very top. The only thing keeping them from spilling over was the surface tension of the liquid.

“I will tell you, once,” Anna said. “If you are tense, it will spill. If you are relaxed, it MAY spill. But if you are balanced, it won't unless you are jiggled or distracted. You don't concentrate on it, because that would be a tension. But you notice. Go ahead. Pick it up and take a sip.”

Marcia picked up the mug, and it immediately spilled down the side. “Beast! Slave driver. And I always thought you were such a NICE girl.”

“Oh, I am. If you don't believe me, just ask me. I'll tell you,” Anna said, grinning, and the table cracked up. “OK, what did you do wrong?”

“I tensed. It's like an instinctive thing with me,” Marcia said, seriously.

“Good, so now you know what needs work, and where,” Anna said. “And really, teaching you is just that easy. But learning it, for your whole body, is difficult. Now – the level is down a little bit. Pick it up again.” Marcia did, and there was no jitter to the mug. “What changed?” asked Anna.

“I wasn't tense. I just picked it up, and didn't think about it,” Marcia said.

“Exactly. Muriel, you told me about Don, when you first tried to get him to connect with you. That he was 'over thinking' it, and couldn't do it at first because of that,” Anna said.

“Yep.”

“Same thing. You cannot think about all the factors that control a movement or an action. You HAVE to let your body sort it out. Taylor,” Anna said, “you try, now.” He did, and didn't spill until just as he was taking a sip. “Some people get their tea over their chin, and some get it all over their chin,” Anna quipped, which caused him to spill again as he set his mug down, laughing. “Now, what happened?”

"I misjudged the size of the mug," Taylor immediately said. "It started to tip before I had it to my mouth."

"Good. Very good. You're observant of your actions. We're getting closer to how to find your balance," Anna said. "Muriel, your turn." And Muriel locked eyes with Anna, and calmly picked up her mug, took a generous sip of coffee, and set it down. "Good. You've found your balance. Do you know how you did it?"

"No," Muriel said. "I just did it."

"OK, then we need to work on that. You're doing it, but don't know why," Anna said. "You will, before we're done. Rob?"

Rob just closed his eyes, and held up one finger, then his whole hand, and seemed to concentrate for a moment. Then he smiled, and opened his eyes, and picked up the mug and took a sip, and set it down without a spill. "I cheated," he immediately said. "Something you said about working with the soul. So, I got in contact with my soul and asked it how IT would do it. Then I let it. Now, let me see something." And he stood up, and walked across the room to the gym. He picked up a ball and tossed it up in the air several times, catching it with opposite hands, then tossing it back up again. Finally, he stopped and took a jump rope, and jumped a few times, then walked back and sat down.

"Ouch!" he said. "OK, I found a few muscles that I need to work on. And I'll need a couple of extra minutes for my body to catch back up with my soul. But now I understand what you mean about it being easy to teach, but hard to learn. Maybe I can make it easier. Ask you soul to do it. Let it BE your body."

"Yes," Anna said. "Exactly. Let your soul be your body. Or your body be your soul. Whichever way you look at it. Rob, you may not have seen enough of Envoys to have noticed this, but Envoys NEVER make a mistake in a movement. And the reason is because they ARE their body. Muriel, you've seen Mata, and how she targets her monitor when someone comes off with a zinger. That is NOT a mistake. She's doing that on purpose."

"She told me that, once. I'm not sure I understood what she meant until now," Muriel said. "You're literally saying that Envoys can't make a mistake."

"No, I'm saying that they can't make a mistake in movements. They do make mistakes, simply because they don't have the experiences we have. At least, at first. We corrupt them by teaching them how we think, and what we find important," Anna said. "Muriel, you remember how I walked after that first encounter with the slob, shortly after my being trained?"

"Yes, of course," Muriel said. "You walked as if you had more confidence in yourself."

"Nope. I walked as if my soul was still controlling the body. That whole episode was a set-up from the beginning," Anna said. "When he came in and sounded off, I just tossed the

whole thing to my soul, and it helped me manipulate him into shooting me. No, it wasn't the soul doing the talking and thinking. But it DID show me how to manipulate him. So, when I started that rough day of learning from my trainers on how to ride and dance, I did the same thing. I tossed the problem to my soul. IT came up with the method of using speed healing to train, strengthen and build my muscles. Then, we BOTH checked it against what was known in Home and what Fran and Mark knew about it. What I'm saying is trust your soul. You KNOW it started out as Envoy. And, at it's deepest level, it still is. Muriel, you fell into being physically balanced because your soul is closer to being Envoy than human. It had no prior experience in being human. Taylor, you've studied this, and learned that way, but never really tossed it to your soul. Marcia, I'm not even going to talk about you. But Rob got it. And now, he's hurting. But that will pass. Just muscles that weren't used to being called on to perform the actions he told his soul to perform. WELL done, sir. And that's how you teach your body to be balanced in what it does. I'll run you through some dance moves, simply because they are the extremes of what you might ever face and not because I'm trying to make a dancer out of you."

"Not all in one day, I hope," Rob said.

"Nope. You'd be in agony afterward if I did that," Anna said. "But I can come back, in what would be late afternoon for me, and help you. Unless something comes up that NEEDS my immediate attention."

"There is always that. And if that happens, I'll just continue to work on the ones you HAVE shown me," Rob said. "Anna, I can't thank you enough. You just opened up and solved the problem I was having. I was fighting myself."

"Wait a minute!" Marcia said. "YOU never showed that YOU can pick it up and drink without spilling. AND without using Envoy techniques." Anna just grinned, and locked eyes with Marcia. Then picked up her mug and drank off the entire contents, then slapped the mug upside down on the table.

"Challenge a Russian to a drinking game, you would?" she said, laughing. "I'd still be going while you ran for the bathroom. And worse, you'd challenge a Cossack! Who do you think invented such games?"

"Nasty, evil little girl. Using unfair advantage on us poor Americans," Marcia laughed. "Just wait, young lady. There are still things you don't know, and I can't WAIT until you come asking me about them."

"How do you know I don't know?" asked Anna, grinning back. "At eleven, life was a wonder. It still is. And I'm enjoying every minute of it."

"WICKED, nasty, evil little girl. I'll tell your mother on you," Marcia grinned.

"Fine. AFTER you've mastered what I've shown you," Anna laughed.

"Vicious, too," Marcia said.

"You know? I think I'm beginning to understand. Like why Muriel says that she's just a girl doing a job," Rob suddenly said. "It's hard to believe. We're taught that leaders and rulers are special people. But that's just their ego talking. You're like everyone else. Just people. You have jobs to do that make you LOOK important to ordinary people. But the reality is that you're just people doing a job. And it's one that you enjoy doing, and do well. And that you've taken the time to learn more about it to do it better."

"Does that mean that you can call me Taylor, now?" Taylor asked, plaintively.

Rob laughed. "Yes. In private. I'd never do it where it was questionable as to whether there were people who were not friends around. I'd be thought presumptive. Taylor."

"Good enough!" Taylor said. "Which, of course, means that now that you can see yourself as my friend, you can tell me off when I do something stupid."

"Um. Can I reconsider?" asked Rob, which set the table laughing.

"Seriously," Taylor said, "you have the right to make suggestions, or even tell me that I'm wrong. I value input from people I know I can trust. And you're one of them, now. I'll listen. I may not always agree with you, or take a particular suggestion, but I'll always listen and seriously consider what you say."

"But . . . I'm just a probationary policeman. What would I know?" asked Rob.

"You'd know injustice when you see it," Taylor said. "You'd know when people need help or protection. You'd know when something isn't right. You'd know when someone is being taken advantage of by people misusing the law or by unfair contracts. And now, you're a man with powerful friends. Everyone at this table, for starters, and more that you haven't even met. You are friends with the Ambassadors of Home, and can call on us when you need help."

"He's not kidding, Rob," Muriel said. "Remember that long string of titles I rattled off? I don't usually make a big thing of that long string of titles, because it distances me from people. But they're there, and they're my job. And the people at this table are all Ambassadors and rank right up there with the rulers of countries, because they're Ambassadors from a whole world – a whole other universe. We support our friends. And I've made a lot of them over the years."

"I feel like I've just been dropped into some sort of high society, or maybe an exclusive club," Rob said. "I don't know what to say!"

"Well, actually closer to the latter than the former. Ambassadors all trust each other to be honest. In fact, I'd make you one, except I don't have anything to make you an Ambassador of," Muriel said.

"That's easy," Taylor said. "The Commissioner knows who and what we are, but he's

NOT an Ambassador. So, he's not really a liaison between the police and you. I'm liaison between the government and you, so I don't really speak for the Police. Or any of the emergency services, for all of that. Rob knows the Commissioner"

"Whether I want to or not," Rob said. "Basically, he's a good guy. He just doesn't think outside the box he's built around himself unless he's forced to."

"This would leave him free to decide if he wants to stay with the police or not," Taylor added.

"You're pushing, Taylor," Muriel said. "Why?"

"Because you used to do ALL of it in America. Mostly alone," Taylor said. "You dealt with governments, police agencies, 'little people', everything. And you couldn't be everywhere or hear everything. And recently, that's changed as you started putting in Ambassadors to other countries. Not even all your Ambassadors think outside their little corner of what they do. This would give you another voice, here. And it would provide some security for a man that hasn't had any for a couple of years, through no fault of his own."

"Uh, huh," Muriel said. "And because it would be tweaking the nose of a man that tried to tweak OUR nose. Right?"

"Well, a little. I just can't see Smythe as a viable liaison. He has to be pushed to see that there are new ways of doing things. And we constantly have to prove to him that we really can do what we say we can. Rescue and Recovery. Rob's been rescued, and now he's recovering, thanks to Marcia. And he's already taught even YOU something, though that's no real surprise. You learn from everybody. But what he taught you was that you were using a method that he could see, but not using it fully. And he was able to describe it. I think he even taught Anna something. Something that she knew, but didn't realize consciously. And she was the one that came up with it."

"Well, Rob," Muriel said. "What do YOU think?"

"I wouldn't know what to do," he said.

"We can teach you what you need to know. Mostly, it's just being aware of when our help is needed, offering it to whoever needs it, and making sure we know so we CAN help," Muriel said. "It might mean convincing your father-in-law that it's necessary in a situation. But if you could convince him to let you marry his daughter, I don't see that as a problem."

Rob laughed, "I didn't convince him, SHE did."

"You're right. Maybe we've got the wrong person," Muriel said, grinning.

"You really think this is something I could do?" asked Rob.

"Oh, sure. Besides, it would give you the opportunity to be around Taylor and keep him

straightened out,” Muriel said. “And, of course, you'd get to meet and know Envoys, and work around them.” And Muriel saw a gleam come into his eye. “Of course, if you don't WANT to be an Ambassador”

“OK, I'll try. But I still don't know what to do,” Rob said.

“You will, when the time comes,” Muriel said. “Look at your passport.”

“Diplomat?” Rob asked, looking at it. Then he looked inside.

“All Ambassadors are diplomats. It's the nature of the beast,” Muriel said. “And like I said, this gives you access to Taylor. Of course there is a restriction on that, but it's not bad. If he's busy, you might have to wait. Or talk to me, and maybe I can push it through, if it's an emergency. OK?” Rob just nodded. Then straightened up.

“I'm going to have to get fit as soon as possible,” he said.

“Yes, but don't push too hard,” Anna said. “You could actually do damage to yourself that way. Your soul will know when it's time to quit, and let the body catch up. From what I've seen, just a couple of days will have you fit for duty, and perhaps more than fit. I'll come by, each day, and check to be sure that it's all going well, and I'll let you know when you're ready. Even if they put you back on the street, you'll be ready.”

“Rob,” Muriel said, “You don't have to rush back to work. The Commissioner knows that you're here. And even if he puts it out as unpaid leave, you still won't be out anything. You're on salary with Home for being an Ambassador. And believe me, that will cover more than just living expenses. So, take your time and do it right.”

“You're kidding! You put me on salary?” asked Rob.

“ALL Ambassadors are salaried,” Muriel said. “That's standard, and has been since I became on, myself.”

“And, if I know Muriel,” Taylor said, “there's a squad over there, right now, going over your flat and fixing problems, checking and fixing the plumbing and electric, and strengthening it. It's all part of being employed by Home. Home takes care of its people.”

Chapter 23

A Day on the Beat

(Monday morning)

Rob didn't actually go back to work until Monday morning. Anna released him Thursday afternoon, after his last workout. But when he reported, Friday, the Commissioner told him to take an extra day, so he could find a place for him. That told Rob that what he had been doing was unnecessary, and that he'd been kept on only because he'd been hurt on the job and was the Commissioner's son-in-law. However, it DID give him three more days of exercise, to build up stamina.

Monday morning, he was sent to the Kidbrooke area paired with an experienced officer and sent back out on the streets. He and the corporal seemed to wander, but Rob was keeping track of direction as well as street names. Much of the area seemed run down, and some of it was being leveled for a new 'village'.

"This is an area where we put in a presence, during the day, but it's only patrolled by car at night," the corporal said. "Lots of kids, here. Lots of teenagers that can't see any future, and they're angry. We try to talk to them, try to find out what the problems are. Trouble is, there's so many for them that the anger is unfocused, and comes out in destructive behavior of one form or another. Tear it all down, and they'd just move elsewhere and have the same trouble again."

"What about training," asked Rob.

"What? You mean Envoy training?" asked the corporal. "Too expensive for them."

"But it doesn't cost anything!" Rob said.

"How do you know?"

"I'm trained. In fact, until a couple of days ago I was paralyzed and in a wheelchair. An Ambassador in that new building where the private equity firm used to have its headquarters helped me," Rob said.

"Why would he do that?" asked the corporal. And Rob looked a bit harder. No stripes. The corporal wasn't trained.

"Not he. She," Rob said. "I was sent to meet her. She took one look at me, and called in a friend that healed me up. Then they proceeded to train me. Didn't take very long, and they were very nice about it. Not snobbish or anything. Spent the next few days working out to get back into shape."

"Yea? Well, what I hear is it's only for the upper crust – that's why it's so expensive. They want to keep the ordinary people down," the corporal said.

"Well, I've never heard that it cost anything," Rob insisted. "In fact, the whole thing was started by an ordinary person. A twelve year old girl," he added. "A twelve year old girl from an ordinary family on a limited income. Didn't cost her anything, and she turned around and trained her friends."

"Yea, I bet," the corporal said. "That's the way they are, do for their friends, and to heck with the rest. I'd like to see one o' them Ambassadors come down here and see what we have to deal with. Some of these kids would be real nice, if they had a chance, I bet."

"Where are you from, corporal?" asked Rob.

"Up around Tottenham, originally. Moved around a bit since then," he said. "Now, not really far from here, physically. But about four levels higher, economically. Why?"

"I was just wondering. I know they had training stations up all over the city. Maybe even further out. That was, what, about five years ago I think. I was interested, but my parents felt that I should grow up more, first. As far as I know, the training was free. I was considering going down to the British Enclave as soon as I could after being taken on full time with the force," Rob said.

"So, you went and got yourself trained and became one of those pansies?" the corporal asked.

"I doubt if the young lady that I talked to could be called a pansy," Rob said. "After all, she passed the SAS training. Among others. Her boss is just as tough."

"Well, you pull any of those fancy stunts around me, and I'll have you up on charges," the corporal said with some heat. "You hear me, pansy boy?"

"Corporal, one of the things that I was taught was how to make a record of everything I see and hear," Rob said, quietly. "Trying to put me up on charges for doing what's necessary in an emergency would only get you cashiered. At best. DON'T threaten me. I just don't threaten worth a damn, anymore."

"What! You think you can take me? I've got the experience, and I'm not just out of whatever that was that you had that let you slack off," the corporal said. And that's when the corporal made a mistake. "Little piss-ant," he said, and swung.

The blow never connected, of course. It stopped a foot away from the side of Rob's face. Worse, though, was the fact that the corporal was instantly encased in a shield that held him in the position he was in trying to deliver the blow. And, unfortunately, there was even worse to come.

"Hi, Rob," a woman's voice said. "Interesting tableau. Anyone would think that this person was trying to hit you. Is this normal behavior in the Metropolitan Police? That corporals try to hit probationary officers?"

"Oh, hi, Marcia. No, this seems to be a case of the haves versus the have-nots," Rob replied. "Definitely NOT the way that responsible persons behave."

"You've got a record of it?" asked a second female voice.

"Of course," Rob said. "Here you go, Muriel. By the way, you notice the local? Deserted tenement buildings and row houses in disrepair and cordoned off? I don't think the corporal wanted anyone to witness the fact that the corporal was about to 'teach the young probationary officer' who was boss. Pity that he didn't understand how bad such a behavior would go against him. I'll just take him back to the station and see what the captain feels about such behavior."

"You're in trouble, now, you little piss-ant," the corporal said.

"Well, that'll be an interesting experience," Rob said.

"Mind if we tag along?" asked Muriel. "I've never seen how the British deal with an officer attempting to strike a fellow officer."

"Feel free, Muriel," Rob grinned. "I'm sure that the Captain would be overjoyed to know that the events were witnessed by two fine, upstanding citizens such as you."

"Well, why don't we make that three, then," Taylor said, coming into view. "Then his cup of joy would be so overflowing that it would be running down his leg."

"Well, no sense standing around here, Your Majesty," Rob said. "We'll just be on our way." And Rob translated all five to the captain's office.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS!" the Captain shouted as they translated in.

"THAT is a very good question, Captain," Taylor said. "Is it normal in this station for corporals to go around trying to hit probationary officers?"

"Y-Y-Your Majesty."

"Yep. That's what I've been told I am. Oh, and before you try one of your lies, I was there and witnessed it," Taylor said. "As did Muriel, Leader of Home and Ambassador to Earth, and Ambassador Marcia, leader of the Home Rescue and Recovery unit. So, anything you have to say is bound to be found interesting by a Crown Court."

"YOU!" the Captain said to the corporal. "You've been warned about such behavior. You're fired."

"Muriel?"

"On it. Nope," she said after a moment. "I don't see anything in here about a warning

for behavior. I do see a number of times that the corporal complained that someone he was partnered with tried to hit him, and he had to defend himself. Interesting defense. It would appear that the corporal put six different people in the hospital. Oh, and the corporal was commended, each time, by the Captain. Hmm. Digging a little further shows that all six were assigned to this station by the Commissioner. You know, Taylor, anyone looking at this would wonder if the Captain was afraid that the Commissioner was trying to spy on him and this station. Do you know that it's the only station that doesn't have trained people?"

"Curiouser and curiouser," Taylor said. "Well, I think we'll just have to see about this. Commissioner, this is Taylor" he said and sent. "Would you be so kind as to join this unhappy throng?"

The Commissioner came in, rather white faced. "Your Majesty."

"It would seem that we've discovered the reason your people ended up in the hospital, Commissioner. I do believe you have a rogue station," Taylor said.

"Give me a minute, Taylor, and I'll try to find out how bad the damage is," Muriel said. "My security chief has squad three on it, now."

"You know, this is interesting. I headed a Regiment, and the ones that didn't quite fit in were shuffled into one company. And within a short period of time that company became the poster child for the entire Regiment. Here," Taylor said in disgust, "the malcontents were gathered and became the trash heap of the force. And, it would appear that in BOTH cases, the one in charge actually requested the individuals. What does that tell you?"

"Right off hand," Marcia piped up, "It tells me that the commanders had different approaches to the problem. One chose to find out what people's problems were, and help them overcome them. The other chose to gather people about him with similar attitudes."

"You know, Marcia?" Taylor said, "I do believe you may have something there. Certainly, I didn't hesitate to elevate the major that turned those malcontents into model soldiers. So, what does one do with a Captain that gathers the malcontents and lets them run wild and attack people."

"Well, Your Majesty," Marcia said, "I was never in the military, so I can't really say. Personally, I'd be looking for formal charges against anyone involved in such a situation. But I don't know if you could get enough hard evidence in this case."

"That's a VERY interesting point, Marcia. Well, what about performance reviews? Wouldn't they show something" asked Taylor.

"Not if they were being slanted by someone that encouraged bad behavior, Your Majesty," Muriel said. "And from what Mata is telling me, ALL the personnel in this station have glowing performance reviews. Even this interesting Corporal."

"Really! You mean to tell me that a man that would go around striking subordinates

would get a good performance review for such behavior?" Taylor asked. "May I ask who performed the review?"

"Well, according to this, it was the captain," Muriel said. "Taylor, I'm beginning to think that there's a problem, here. Isn't this the area you said had some of the worst gang violence in the city?"

"Why! I do believe you're right! Commissioner, what do YOU think," Taylor asked, pointedly.

"Captain," Smythe said, "what do you have to say for yourself and your command?"

"We do what we've got to do in this hell hole," the captain said.

"What you're SUPPOSED to be doing is following police procedures. You DO know what those are, don't you?" Smythe asked, rather heatedly. "If you were having trouble out here, you were supposed to let the home office know, so we could find the best way to deal with it. You WEREN'T supposed to agitate the population and cause a worse problem. There has never been a request for assistance from you. It wasn't until there were flareups here that we realized there WAS a problem. And when even His Majesty can see that there's a problem, well, you DO know what they say flows downhill!"

"Yea? And what are you and your Nancy-boys going to do about the situation?" asked the captain.

"Right off hand, I'd say remove the agitation for cause," Smythe said. "And replace it with a functional unit."

"Yea? And where are you going to find the men to do it?" the captain retorted. "You're constantly complaining that you're short-handed as it is!"

"MY problem, mister," Smythe said. "You're relieved of duty. Indefinite suspension while an investigation of your behavior and that of your troops is completed. You'll be notified of the results of that investigation. I suggest that you not leave the city until the investigation is completed. Is that understood?"

"Sir," he replied, snidely.

"Now clear out while I find someone to take over in your place. And as for you, corporal . . . oh, release him, Rob. No sense his standing there like a statue. I think you've made your point," Smythe said. "You," he added to the corporal, "are under arrest for attempting to hit a subordinate. Other charges may also be applied, pending an investigation of the allegations you made concerning the attacks of others that you've been shepherding around." Two officers showed up, and cuffed the corporal, and translated him out.

"OK, NOW what do I do with this place?" asked Smythe. "If I put someone in charge, it's very likely that they'll end up in the hospital within days. This is a rough crew."

"I can think of two ways that it can be handled," Muriel said. "You can outsource the entire station to Home, and have Envoys on the job in minutes. Or you can replace the captain with someone that's had the Envoy training, and let him sort it out."

"I'm not sure the second idea would work, Muriel," Rob said. "A lot of these men would refuse to change. They've become set in their ways. It may take a mix of Envoys and regular troops to finally stabilize it."

"Really, Lieutenant Howell," said the Commissioner. "And where would I find someone to head such a mix?"

And Rob gulped. "I really couldn't say, sir."

"Hmm. Your Majesty? Any suggestions?" asked Smythe.

"Well, I know Muriel, and the way that she'd handle it," Taylor said. "But I don't know that it would meet your approval. Right off-hand, I'd say that she'd put a likely looking candidate in charge, and back him up with whatever Envoys he needed to be able to hit the ground running. And that includes office staff to sort out and investigate the behavior of the previous commander and troops."

"Sound about right to you, Lieutenant Howell?" asked the Commissioner. "I can't very well jump you to Captain, yet. Maybe next year. It'll be bad enough trying to explain jumping you from probationary directly to Lieutenant, Lieutenant Howell," he said, making sure the emphasis was there.

"Whatever you say, sir. I'll do my best," Rob said.

"Very well, then. You're in charge," Smythe said.

"Request a variance in the uniform, sir!" Rob said.

"And what would that variance be?" asked his father-in-law.

"Bloused boots, sir," Rob replied. "Just enough with the standard street uniforms to indicate that the troops CAN fight, but choose not to unless provoked and in the line of duty."

"Interesting idea. Approved, and we'll see how it goes," Smythe said. "I'll leave you alone to get on with it, then." And he translated out.

"Mata?" asked Muriel.

"Already on it. He's got a squad to handle the office and a security squad, immediately. And dressed the way he suggested," Mata said, translating in. "And we've got backup to replace any incorrigibles coming on line in about ten minutes. We just need to feed them the police procedures. Sorry. He surprised me with that one."

“Rob,” Muriel said, “Home will back you. But I expect that you won't need help for long. I think I see what you're trying to do. May I make a suggestion? Do much the same that Taylor did. Grab candidates right out of the Academy, and let Envoys shepherd them around. That'll set up the right attitude in them, right off the bat. Make sure they're trained, and give them enough of the physical conditioning side of it to keep them fit. In the mean time, meet the people and try to establish a good relationship. It can help.”

“Yep. I didn't think of the way you suggested for moving from Envoys to humans. But that makes sense. The rest, though sounds very good,” Rob said. “What you're saying is to let the office crew do their job, and get out on the street and find out what's happening. I may be feeding problems back to you to help field, though. A lot of these people seem to have a lot of problems, and pretty words aren't going to solve them.”

“Like I said, Home backs you. We'll listen, and we'll find ways to deal with the problems. Oh, and you have a security squad, just in case. Mostly for show. Well, you know the way I work,” Muriel said. “We've talked about that. Your idea of the bloused boots makes sense, too. Much like what I did with our Class A uniforms. Just enough of the hint of the ability to act to put some of the more aggressive off their stride,” she added, grinning. “OK, your office staff is here. Any reason for us to stick around?”

“Nope. I'll have to figure it out as I go along,” Rob said. “I'll manage. If I can't, then I'm not cut out for this job. Thanks. For everything. ALL of you. The healing, the training, the additional courses. Oh, and for making suggestions to the Commissioner that ended me up here and with a promotion. Now it's time for me to REALLY earn it.”

“You're welcome, Rob. Just remember who your friends are, and that you CAN call on us. And that we're happy to have you drop by to say 'hi' from time to time.” Muriel said. “Bye for now,” she added, and they translated out.

Chapter 24

Well, Can You Beat That

(Monday morning, later - afternoon)

"Listen up, people," Rob's voice rang out in the office. "There's been a change of command in this station. That change came about because your previous commander and some of you people had decided to stray from approved Metropolitan Police procedures. That ends. NOW. This station WILL adhere to Met procedures. Variances will be brought to me BEFORE they are initiated, and I will pass them past the Commissioner. IF they are approved, THEN you will be allowed to use them. If you're not familiar with Met procedures, look them up. If you refuse to follow Met procedures, then you are making the choice to leave your position. I suggest that you do so, willingly, because if I have to fire you it will lower your chances of getting another good job."

"Second, there is a term that gets bantered around in the military from time to time, from what I hear. The term is 'white war'. That's where people decide that they don't like the bosses attitude and load him down with trivia or do exactly what he says, but in such a way that it's absolutely wrong. Now, by my defining it, you should be smart enough to figure out that I'll spot such behavior right off the bat. Guess what your chances of landing a good job after I fire you will be. Anyone here want to practice saying 'do you want fries with that'? No? I didn't think so," Rob added.

"Third. I've been made painfully aware that this station has a high level of individuals who have NOT taken the Envoy training. Such training is voluntary. I can't force you to take it. And I won't. However, I know for fact that it is very beneficial, and heartily recommend it. And I'm not the only one. In the entire population of the Metropolitan Police, there is a very low percentage that have NOT taken the training. Most of them are in this station. I won't fire you if you don't have the training. But you won't advance, either, and will be encouraged to find work elsewhere, and as quickly as possible. It's your choice, people. Just as continuing to work here is your choice. There are people here that have the ability to train you. I'm one of them," he said, causing his stripes to flare, slightly. "Others include Jenkins, my secretary, and four others. You can approach any of us about it. And the time necessary to take the training will NOT be docked from your pay. Nor will the training cost you anything. So think about it. You've got a couple of weeks to come to a decision," he concluded.

"Now, unlike your previous commander, I WILL be out on the streets, seeing what's going on, and trying to figure out how to correct the disaster that he created, here," Rob said. "And I'll be looking for two things. The first is the attitude of the population and their problems, with a view to correcting them. The second is the attitude and behavior of the members of this station, with a view to correcting them. Sergeants, there will be a CD on your desk with this little talk. You WILL play it for your troops and make sure they understand. THAT IS an order. It will be done without comment, without criticism, and without terms like 'martinet' being used. They can form their own opinions of me without your help."

"Jenkins, I'll be out of the station for the next couple of hours. You know how to reach

me if something comes up,” Rob said, then translated out in full view of the office.

And on a street a few blocks away, he translated in, and found a man matching his pace beside him. “We’ll be in stealth, around you, if you need us, sir,” he said.

“Thanks. I shouldn’t have any problem, though,” Rob said. “And it’s just Rob. If what Muriel tells me is correct, you people will end up like a second skin to me, after a while. So we might as well start moving in that direction now. And my skin certainly doesn’t call me ‘sir’.” That got a chuckle as the man winked out.

Rob walked on, alone. Or at least seemingly alone. Most of this was old ‘bedroom’ community, with very few stores available. That meant that people had to travel some distance just for food. There were some parks and such. But most of them looked little used and ill-kempt. Of course, this was a work day, and many people were probably about their jobs, now. Except for older teens that had dropped out of school and young adults that didn’t have jobs, like that – OH SHIT – group approaching him. Rob continued on as if nothing had happened, and reinforced his personal shield, which GIGGLED! He wondered if he’d EVER get used to that.

“Well, will you look at that?” asked what appeared to be the leader. “We got us one o’ them blue monkey boys, and he’s all alone. Whatcha doin’ out alone, monkey boy?” Rob just pulled his shield in to an inch outside his skin, smiled, and kept walking.

“Hey, monkey boy, I was talking to you,” the leader said, putting an arm out to stop him.

“Tell me,” Rob said, quietly, “do you like that arm?”

“What the hell is that suppose to mean?” the leader asked.

“Oh, I was just wondering how many pieces you’d like it to be in,” Rob said. “You’re accosting a Metropolitan Police officer in a rather derogatory manner. I feel it’s only polite to let you know that you’re outnumbered, one to ten.”

“Yea, but WE’RE the TEN,” the leader said, puffing himself up.

“I know. That’s why I felt it would be advisable for me to let you know that you were outnumbered. I’M the one. You’d be better served looking for work than looking for trouble. But since I’m here, and I’m trouble, you’ve decided to look for me, instead,” Rob said. “You’re about six inches away from taking up residence in an establishment that I don’t think you’d like. Even if it is free. Assaulting an officer is a criminal offense. You’ve got enough troubles without adding that to them.”

“Yea? Well you ain’t our boss,” the leader said.

“You’re right. I expect my people to behave better than you are. I’m also not your father, or you’d have learned at an early age that being a bully can be rather painful,” Rob

said.

“Yea? Well, monkey boy, I don't like your attitude,” the leader said. Rob pulled his shields back to his skin, just as the leader reached out and grabbed the front of his tunic. Rob forcibly pushed the shield back out to two feet, with such speed that the leader flew through the pack of teens and young adults like a bowling ball hitting pins in an alley. A second later, the gang was laying on the ground with the leader some distance behind them.

“And that's the other reason that it isn't advisable for someone to attack me,” Rob said. “I don't put up with that nonsense.” Rob started walking through the group of fallen 'heroes', and one reached for him. Rob just looked at the man and his eyes blazed black. “Don't,” he said, quietly. “Don't even think about it. You'll want children, one day. Or at least the practice at making them. Save yourself from the painful removal of that ability.” The man drew his hand back, and Rob continued to the fallen leader.

“OK, let's see how bad it is,” Rob said. “Uh, huh. Nothing but bruises and a lump on your head. Hold still. This won't take but a moment.” And the battlefield first aid kicked in. As he worked, Rob squatted down on his toes, like Anna had shown him in one of his first sessions, perfectly balanced and with his elbows on his knees. “Now, isn't that better? You really don't have to play the tough with me. Well, for one thing, it just doesn't work. I look around, and I can see why you're disillusioned and angry. But there are things that you can do about it. Without the anger. You can help people. Help them fix up their flats. Help older people that have trouble getting out for the things they need. You can find jobs. Oh, I know, your sullen attitude holds you back some, but you can overcome it. They may not be fancy jobs, but they bring in money. Money that you can use to get out of places like this and into a useful life. You can even take the Envoy training and learn how I do the things I do.”

“W-W-Who ARE you,” the leader asked.

“My name is Rob Howell. I'm a Lieutenant in the Metropolitan Police, and I've just taken command of the station, here,” Rob said. “Come by sometime and we can talk. Bring your friends, if you like. DON'T bring the attitude. Tell others. Heck, tell your enemies. That'll save me having to repeat this performance with them.”

“You one of them foreign critters I've heard tell about?” asked the leader.

“Nope. I'm human. Envoys only have one name. You probably wouldn't know if you met one casually, anyway. They look just like humans,” Rob said. “Why? Want to meet one? Come on in, guys. Help some of these up. There may be other bruises.”

“WHAT!” yelled the leader, as six Envoys appeared around them. “Were they the reason you could do that stuff?”

“Oh, no sir,” said the security chief. “We wouldn't dream of interfering with Rob's fun. He had the situation well in hand. No need for us. No, we just sat back and watched. And laughed.” And the leader blushed. “He's almost as outrageous as Muriel, our leader.”

"You have a leader?" the gang leader asked.

"Oh, sure. Second one we've had. First one was good, but rather conservative," the security chief said. "Then he found Muriel and had her trained. And she started training US. Darnedest thing we ever saw. A human, training us in our own techniques. And at twelve years of age. And she still does teach us. So do her friends. They all excel at finding outrageous solutions to impossible problems." And around them, Envoys started helping the gang to their feet – smiling and polite, and checking them for bruises.

"You're not cops," the leader said.

"Nope. Just his private security force. He DOES take the uniform off, sometimes. Not that that would help you," the security chief said. "I'm beginning to think that we're here mostly to pick up after him," he added, chuckling.

"Is this what the entire station is like?" asked the leader.

"Not yet. But soon," Rob replied. "Things were really messed up, there. I've been put in to straighten them out. And to try to change the attitude of the population in the area, if I can. You could help with that. Like I said, there are people that need help. With some training, you might be able to make things better for them. Think it over." And Rob stood up, then translated back to his office.

"Enjoy yourself," asked Jenkins.

"Moderately so," Rob replied. "Anything going on here?"

"A few questions about the training. A couple of outraged sergeants that have discovered that you mean business," Jenkins said. "We sat them down and made them watch your little presentation, again. Then watch as you took on that gang. 'Outnumbered one to ten', indeed. Think you'll see anything more of them?"

"Yea, I think so. To be so thoroughly trounced by one man, then let go without anything to show for it," Rob said, "well, it's got to be demoralizing, and make them want to know more about how I did it. And, hopefully, the word will spread. First, don't mess with the Mets. And second, that people CAN be trained."

"Well, your troops are in a state of shock, right now. The world's been turned upside down, and they're not sure how to act," Jenkins said. "From what I can tell, though, the worst of the abusive attitude is being reined in, and they're beginning to act more like police and less like a gang."

"Well, that a start. I just was hoping that some had started to take the training," Rob said.

"Give it time, sir. It's only been a couple of hours. Speaking of which, have you had lunch? And what would you like?" Jenkins asked.

"Any place I can get fish and chips?" asked Rob.

"Yes. Right here. What would you like to drink?"

"Soda. Not a cola, I think. Something lighter," Rob said. "I'll probably be in for the afternoon. Speaking of which, are you making any sense out of the records?"

"Indeed, sir," Jenkins said, handing him a plate of food and a glass of something that looked vaguely reddish. And a napkin. The drink turned out to be sarsaparilla. "We have three that I wouldn't suggest training. They wouldn't make it. A half dozen others that might make it with extensive work on their balance before attempting the trip Home. The rest are guesswork about how hard the Judgment would hit them. That's just from the records of their arrests, and incidents, so the reality may differ from the records. Also, the captain was intentionally instigating violence in the area, and not patrolling as he should have. He was aiming toward creating riots in the area, to justify harsher performance by the officers."

"Pass what you're finding along to the Commissioner, would you please?" Rob said. "Along with the evidence. Where did you get this food?"

"It isn't right?" asked Jenkins.

"NO! It's great. It's just what I wanted, and just the way I like it!" Rob exclaimed.

"Ah, good. Then we did it right." Jenkins said.

"You . . . what do you mean, YOU did it right?" asked Rob.

"Oh, I thought you knew. We literally make the food. Just like you make clothes or coffee cups, or anything. Perfectly nutritious, I assure you, sir," Jenkins. "We do it the same way that the Envoys at the Rescue and Recovery unit do it. And yes, we check your body for any special needs it might have at the time." Rob just looked at the fish in his hand.

"The same way . . .," Rob said, then started laughing. "I never realized. And should have. They said that they were adding nutrients to replace things that my body used in rebuilding. It just never hit me that they were actually making it. Is it something that humans can learn to do?"

"Of course. Is your wife trained, sir?" asked Jenkins.

"No. I'm not sure why. Well . . . maybe she's waiting to see how it affects me," Rob said.

"Well, then. I'll just make sure that the dump includes how to go directly from power to shields to complete meals that have everything you need in them," Jenkins said. "Give us some time to put it together. It makes for a larger dump. But just pass it to your soul, and you'd be ready to make supper for your wife, tonight."

"Make . . . it never occurred to me to make things for myself using the techniques," Rob said.

"Oh, definitely. Clothing, of course. But really, anything that you need. Or even just want," Jenkins said. "That's what it's there for. It's the reason that an Enclave can be run on a money-less economy. Same with the Rescue and Recovery unit. Or Muriel's office." And Rob looked around his office and the one where the sergeants and staff were seated. "Yes, even paint and such. If we have an idea of what you would like done, we can have it ready for you tomorrow morning."

"Oh. My. I'm not thinking large enough," Rob said. "OH! That opens up possibilities for helping these people. Thank you, Jenkins. Yes, I'd like anything you have or can come up with about how to make things. Not just meals, but anything."

Chapter 25

Yes, We Can Beat That

(Monday afternoon)

“Sir, there's a young man here to see you,” Jenkins said.

“Send him in, please, Jenkins.”

“Um . . . ,” the teen said, as he tentatively entered. “I was with that group you met this morning,” he began.

“Come in. Have a seat,” Rob said, cheerfully. “Oh, don't mind the clutter. We're still trying to clean up after the last commander. So, what can I do for you?”

“Um . . . can anyone learn to do the things that you do?” the boy asked.

“Usually. There's some that are so far gone that taking them through the last test would cause them to commit suicide,” Rob said. “I've been cautioned about that, and shown how to tell when someone is that far gone, so that it doesn't happen because of my training them.”

“Um . . . you say you can tell when someone is too far gone to take it. Can I take the training?” he asked.

“Yes. Surely. Oh, we might have to help you overcome a few things. You know, make restitution to some people for things you've done,” Rob said. “But the worst would be some embarrassment to you in cleaning up after yourself. Then you wouldn't have any problem with the Judgment of the last test. I take it that you'd like to be trained? When would you like to start?”

“OH! Whenever you had time, or someone that could help me,” the boy said. And Rob called in his security chief.

::It's Denny, Rob. I never got around to telling you my name during the excitement,:: his security chief said, as he appeared, sitting next to the young man. ::And we can train him.::

::Thank you, Denny.::

“You know, I don't even know your name, young man,” Rob said. “At least, what to call you.”

“Oh, Ed, sir. Well, Edmond, really. But I prefer Ed,” the boy said.

“OK, Ed. The man sitting next to you is Denny. He's my security chief, and he's

volunteered to take you through the training, though he'll probably have help from some of the other squad members. And yes, he's an Envoy. But I think you'll find that they're very friendly and helpful," Rob said. "Will that be all right?"

"What? Oh, sure. Whatever you say," Ed said.

"WHERE IS THAT LITTLE PIPSQUEEK!" roared a voice, followed by an officer in full rage and with a gun in his hand. "I'LL TEACH THAT LITTLE JUMPED-UP PROBIE THAT HE CAN'T TELL REAL MEN HOW TO ACT!"

"Sit still, Ed. Denny, protect him."

"Covered, sir. He's safe," the security chief said, reverting to formalities as the officer approached Rob's office and fired off six shots in rapid succession. The spray covered the area of Rob and his visitor and security chief and suddenly stopped, though you could see the officer straining to pull the trigger again.

"Interesting. I see that your performance reviews didn't cover firearms proficiency," Rob said, casually. "Really a poor display," he added, picking the slugs out of the shield in front of him. Denny did the same for those around Ed, and handed them to the shocked boy. "Well, this is a clear violation of the law, you know. Attempted murder. Assault on a police officer. Assaulting a superior officer. Assault with a deadly weapon. How you even got on the force is beyond me. However, that isn't my problem. I'll just make sure that someone will take you in that isn't apt to accidentally let you go free."

And he requested that the Commissioner send someone trustworthy to accept custody of the officer. Moments later an officer that had the stripes indicating Envoy training showed up and took charge of the prisoner and the record. It was then that Rob could finally turn his attention to Ed.

"How is he, Denny?" he asked.

"Shocked. Ears are fine. I protected them. How are yours?" asked Denny.

"What? Oh. They're fine. I think my personal shield kicked in and damped the sound," Rob said. "Ed. Ed, look at me. What's in your hand, Ed?"

The teen looked up, then down at his closed fist, and opened it up. Inside were two bullets. "He shot at me. He aimed his gun at me. Why?" he asked.

"I hardly think he was aiming at anything," Rob said. "I picked three out of my shield, and Denny's got one hanging by his head," he added, chuckling. "Well, I really wasn't expecting to introduce you to the benefits of Envoy training this way. But now you see why I was able to take on ten of you. One of my training exercises pitted six experts against me. Actually, that was fun!"

"Fun?" Ed asked.

"Oh, sure. They were all part of the Rescue and Recovery unit, and I was tossing them all over the gym, hanging them on equipment by their own shields," Rob said. "They'd just get them self loose and come at me again. About fifteen minutes worth, I think. Certainly proved to me that I had enough stamina to handle anything. I wasn't even winded. We were all laughing so hard at the end that we had to quit. Even Anna was laughing."

"Anna?" asked Ed. "Who's she?"

"She's me," a woman's voice said. "Anastasiya Khmelnytsky, Ambassador to Russia. Hello young man. Hi Rob. How are you doing?"

"Oh, not bad. Just got shot at," Rob said.

"I bet that stirred up the adrenaline," Anna said.

"Oh, a bit. But after Don trying to whack me with a baseball bat mostly it was the shock of the idiot trying it here, in the office," Rob said.

"You're"

"The Ambassador to Russia. Yes," said Anna.

"But . . . I thought you were a little girl," Ed said.

"Oh, that was five years ago. It must be that you got one of those action figure sets, too," she said, grinning.

"Yes. I never realized," Ed said. "Of course you'd have grown up."

"Yes, we all do. Rob, would you like me to explain the difference between humans and Envoys to him?" Anna asked.

"Oh, that's not necessary. I'm sure as soon as he realizes that humans have a soul and Envoys ARE soul, that" And Rob was cut off by Ed going into contact shock. And Denny was right there beside him, immediately.

"Oh, this boy is going deep, right off the bat," Denny said. "You may not have much to teach him."

"We do the refresher anyway," Rob said.

"You know, that was nasty, don't you?" Anna said. "You COULD have given him a chance to decide whether or not he wanted the training."

"He did. We'd talked about it before you came in," Rob grinned. "Besides, I couldn't let you take him away from me. He may decide to become a cop."

"Oh, so that's the way the wind blows," Anna grinned back.

"He's coming back," Denny said.

"OOF! OK, THAT explains a lot," Ed said. "And apparently, my soul has been keeping up with the changes between when it was inserted and now. Let's see if I can get the personal shield right," he added, and thought for a bit. Suddenly, it changed to the capsule form that Muriel had invented. "Clothing. Um . . ."

"I'll leave," Anna said. "Then Rob can shield the room and blank anyone from being able to see into it. Rob, call me back when you are ready for the trip Home. I'd like to go along, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind. It shouldn't be long," Rob said, and Anna went out and joined Jenkins in the outer office.

It took about a half hour to get Ed suited up and then run some local translations. The last one was to the outer office, where he let Anna know that they'd be going to Home, soon. Then he dropped the shields on his office and they went in. The trip to Home was uneventful, with the possible exception of Anna contacting someone that had recently died and talking with them for a few minutes. Then they were all back in Rob's office, and Ed was nursing a can of soda, and staring at his stripes, then his passport.

"This makes a difference," Ed finally said. "I'm not going to be able to go back to the gang, am I?"

"I don't see why not," Rob said. "Of course, there will be differences, and you might get into some altercations with the leader. He might think you were trying to take over. But I wasn't kidding about a lot of things that gang can do to help people instead of intimidate them."

"Like what?" asked Ed.

"Like fixing up apartments. Like protecting people from being robbed by other gangs, on their way home," Rob said. "Like training others in Envoy techniques. Like helping other gangs to find a better way."

"Fixing places up, that's the owner's job, and they don't want to do it because it costs money," Ed said.

"True. They don't. Unless they get pushed to obey the law. There ARE laws about the condition of buildings. And they can be forced to either fix them up, have them fixed up by the city and charged for it, or have them taken over by the city," Rob said. "And I think that it's about time that they became aware of their responsibilities."

"Man! You don't know what those people are like!" Ed said.

"Want to bet? I don't own my own place," Rob said. "But my landlord has begun to see the advantage of having my apartment fixed up rather than have the building taken out of his hands and him charged with various crimes and hit with various lawsuits that would totally cripple him."

"Yea. Right. They just hit you with an eviction notice, and you're out. And they go their merry way," Ed said.

"That depends on who does the hitting," Rob said. "I think I can work something out. After all, if you make a landlord an offer he can't refuse, then it doesn't take long for him to see the light."

"Barkeep," Ed said, "I'll have whatever he's having. I want to be able to dream the way HE'S dreaming. Rob, it just doesn't work that way."

"Let me ask you a question. You have flush toilets in your flat, don't you?" Rob asked, and Anna started laughing. "Quiet, you. I'm trying to make a point, here."

"Yea, of course," Ed said. "Sometimes they even work."

"OK, where does that waste go to?" Rob asked.

"Down the drain to the sewers. I guess from there it goes to a treatment plant," Ed said.

"The operant word is 'down'," Rob said. "It's all gravity."

"What he's saying, Ed, is that shit flows downhill," Anna laughed. "So, you start at the top, and suddenly those below discover that there may be a way to keep from getting covered in it. One way is to pass it on down the line. And the landlords are at the bottom of the line. Guess what they find themselves covered in?"

"Yea? And I suppose you're going to tell me that you've got contacts high enough to be able to dump the landlords in it?" Ed said.

"Somebody call me? Hi, Rob. How are things working out for you?" Taylor asked, walking in. Behind him, the entire office was on its feet, looking shell shocked. "Oh, I brought reinforcements. Blame Anna." Ed looked around, stunned, and started to get up. "You. Sit. That's an order," Taylor added to Ed.

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty. Actually, not bad. I decided to tour the neighborhood, this morning, and ended up doing training on someone I met along the way," Rob said, diplomatically.

"So I heard. Anna was keeping Muriel informed of some of your antics," Taylor said laughing. "Nothing like putting the area on notice right off the bat."

"Well, not yet. But we're closing in on it. Sir, do you realize that NONE of these buildings should have passed an occupancy inspection?" asked Rob.

"Yea," Taylor said, seriously. "I know. And there's new ones going up that the building inspectors OKed, that never should have gotten off the drawing board. I've had a little talk with the building inspectors about their methods and procedures. You DO know that the contractors union is busted, don't you? That happened because they tried to foist their sub-standard building practices on Muriel. NOT a good idea. She found not only where the bodies were buried, but what closets held skeletons, and who's hand was the greasiest. She passed the information to me, and suddenly the building passed with flying colors. So, what can we do about THESE buildings, without throwing people out on the street."

"Fix them up. Force the new buildings that are going up to meet REAL standards," Rob said.

"I think I see where he's going, Taylor. You take care of getting the building code updated and enforced," Muriel said. "I'll take care of getting those contractors that wanted to start a guild pulled in under Triple E. Anything else?"

"Is there a way to get some of these dumps fixed up?" asked Rob. "I've only seen them from outside. But Ed, here, LIVES in one of them. He made the comment that sometimes the flush toilets actually work. That give you an idea of what these people are facing?"

"You need a flying squad of fix-it people. Yea, we can get Envoys in here to help," Muriel said. "Of course, we still need a human to head the squad, because of that stupid law that got passed."

"I heard that!" Taylor said. "I'll see what I can do about it."

"And I might have an idea of how to put further teeth in a fix-it squad. I've just got to find the right person to do the job. Have a resource officer in the station that would head it. To show people that the Met aren't all bad guys," Rob said. "I'll have to pass it past the Commissioner, first. But I think he'd buy it. Especially if I could show him that it wouldn't cost him anything but the position of an officer."

"It might help if you had someone in mind to head the squad," Muriel said, and looked at Ed. Taylor looked at Ed. Anna looked at Ed, and grinned. Finally, Rob looked at Ed. And the silence and the stares began to get to him.

"What's everyone looking at ME for. I'm not even a cop!" Ed said. "And I don't know anything about fixing up flats."

"All that can be taught," Muriel said. "Even the basics of being a Metropolitan Police officer. So can the building standards, architecture and engineering, and Envoy techniques for fixing the flats or even the whole buildings. A squad of trained Envoys can be supplied,

and as many more Envoys as a job will take. All we need is someone willing to do the work.”

“And willing to be a cop,” added Rob. “As a resource officer, all the candidate would normally be responsible for is seeing to it that the ones renting or leasing the flat wouldn't get dinged by the landlords for the cost of fixing up the place so it's habitable. It WOULD mean standing up to the landlords. But even that can be taught. We're not expecting the impossible of someone. We're just hoping for a volunteer to start the ball rolling. Whoever it is that was resource officer would have backing.”

“I never passed high school!” Ed said. “How am I supposed to understand all this NEW stuff when I couldn't even understand what was being taught, there?”

“Oh! No problem,” Muriel said. “We worked that out YEARS ago, when I was first trained. All the security chiefs know how to access the courses stored in Home. In fact, just about any Envoy can dump the courses into you. You just pass them to your soul, and let IT sort them out. It takes maybe five minutes for the more advanced courses. And they don't all have to be dumped into you at once. I'm sure Rob can set up a schedule. If he can't then Denny can. No problem. And the advanced courses are all PhD level. Oh, and Rob? My lawyer got ahold of the British branch of Triple E, and the guild for contractors is set up. They're getting the information out to the contractors, now. And they'll back you on setting up the resource squad. Taylor's probably got more information on the building inspectors.”

“Yep. I had my office call the head of the building inspectors, and make it plain to him that we WOULD be looking into how buildings were being built and maintained,” Taylor said. “And that we wouldn't brook any nonsense or high-handedness from his outfit, any more. He wasn't happy. So, my office asked him if he'd like to discuss it with the King. Point made. You won't have any trouble with them about using Envoy techniques. Now, you just have to pass it past the Commissioner.”

“Then, I'd better get right on it,” Rob said. “One way or another, I'll find someone to take the job.”

“ALL RIGHT! I'll take it. But what happens if you can't get the approval, or if I don't work out as the head of the resource squad?” asked Ed.

“Simple. You'd still be a cop. But you'd be one with compassion for the people of this area,” Rob said. “Don't worry, you'll get all the training and help that you need.”

Chapter 26

Yes, Sir! Yes, Sir! Three Bags Full (Tuesday morning)

“Yes, Commissioner. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Of course I realize that, sir. It's absolutely my responsibility, sir. Yes, sir, I DO understand that it could mean my job, sir. I also realize that it could mean jobs and a better chance for the people of this community to find work, sir. The way to deal with anger, sir, is to displace it by removing the causes of the anger, sir,” Rob said into the phone.

Ed had spent the rest of yesterday afternoon getting what he needed to be a cop, including the experiences of a half-dozen trained officers. Now, it was half-way through the morning, and the Commissioner had finally called Rob back. In the mean time, Ed had gotten the courses on Engineering and Architecture, and the add-ons from Carla that showed how to make shields look like real materials and how to make real materials stronger by half-turning them back into shields.

“OK,” Rob said, hanging up, “I got it. He was worried about putting a probationary officer in charge of a squad – even one that was a squad of Envoys. What finally got through to him was the fact that you know the people, and how to approach them without scaring the pants off of them. So, start with the ones directly around where you live. Oh, fix up your own flat, first, so you can show them how it's better. Then reach out to your gang and see if you can help them. Even if all they do is get the Envoy training, that would help them. Take your squad leader with you when you visit others. Just smile and be friendly, not an officious cop, and you shouldn't have any trouble. Word of mouth will do the rest.”

“What about the buildings, then?” asked Ed.

“Good question. Let Muriel know who the landlords are, and let her handle that side of it,” Rob replied.

“I'm supposed to let an Ambassador handle it?” asked Ed.

“Oh. Yea, I know what you mean. But believe me,” Rob said, “it's the sort of thing that she does. She doesn't think about her rank. She thinks about the job at hand. And besides, she may take you with her to deal with landlords and other bureaucracies. To give you experience so you can do it yourself. Believe me, she can teach you plenty, and she doesn't consider it beneath her to do it. She enjoys it. One of her titles is 'troubleshooter', and this is exactly the sort of thing that she troubleshoots. And she's been doing it since she was twelve. In fact, I think she had a meeting planned for today. Just let me see if I'm right, and when it is.”

::Muriel, I've got Ed in my office. Did I hear you right, that you had a meeting planned, today, with some of the landlords?: Rob asked.

::Yes, that's right. In fact, I'll pick him up now,:: Muriel sent back. ::And his squad leader, I think. Good experience for him in how to deal with people that don't want to keep their property up. Be right there.::

"She's on her way. May be a bit. If you need a restroom, now's your chance," Rob said, grinning.

"Too late," Muriel said, translating in. "Naw, I wouldn't do that to you. Go ahead and take your chance, now. And quit looking at me with awe. I'm just a girl doing a job. Just like you. You'll see." Ed sidled past her, and scrambled for the men's room.

"So, you got your approval, huh?" she asked. "Good. I didn't think it would be a problem."

"Well, he did say that if it didn't work it could mean my job," Rob said.

"Don't sweat it," Muriel grinned. "It isn't going to go that way. You gave Ed the pep-talk, didn't you?"

"Yep. Just go in friendly, starting with people that know him. Branch out from there," Rob said. "And start with his own, to act as a show piece."

"He'll have his squad leader with him, too," Muriel said. "And he knows to temper anything that might come up. Trust me, this'll work."

"I have to trust you. You and your people put yourselves on the line, just trying to get me back to normal. And succeeded," Rob said. "If you can work miracles like that, then this should be nothing."

"Not nothing," Muriel smiled, "but something I'm well familiar with. I'm sure he'll tell you all about it when he gets back. Which he is. Ready to go?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ed said.

"It's Muriel. Not that difficult a name, really. And there's a reason why I want you to get used to it. This meeting we're going to," she said, "is with a bunch of landlords that have NO idea who I am. I want them to continue not knowing for as long as possible. If I can convince them that the buildings need work, and that there are three ways to do it, and your's is the easiest and cheapest way without their ever finding out, so much the better. OK?"

"Yes, Muriel," he said like a chastised child.

"Oh, boy, are we going to have to work on you," Muriel said, and translated them to 'The Welcoming One'. "This was done by a friend of mine. The whole building was conceived off of her idea as an architect. Then she did the engineering on it, to be able to pass the building code at the time, which didn't allow for Envoy techniques of building. Well, it was built using Envoy techniques, but designed in such a way that if top materials had been

used it still would have worked. And she made the materials LOOK like they were ordinary materials. And you've got the information on how she did it."

"WOW! Your friend did this alone?" asked Ed.

"Oh, no. She had help with actually building it. Both her and her consort's squads, plus about a hundred Envoys from Home. Sometime, go to the American Enclave, where her office is. Ask her to show you some of the other buildings she's created," Muriel said. "And this is where the meeting will take place. And those poor landlords will be brought in here, just as you have been. Think maybe they'll be shocked?"

"I'll say!" Ed said. "I can't believe this. It looks like a person with wings!"

"Yep. Just through here, now," Muriel said, and went through the doors. Then stopped. Ed hadn't followed her.

"Ed?"

"Muriel, is that you?" Ed asked, staring at the sculpture.

"Oh. Yea," she said. "When Carla showed us the building she hinted that she'd love to have an image behind the reception desk that showed that the idea was a human with wings. So, I made that for her. Took a couple of hours, and had to be done in place."

"But . . . HOW? What did you use as a model?" he asked.

Muriel took him back out in the parking lot and had him stand at one point while she went on. Then she turned, grew, sprouted wings, and glowed. "Like this," she said. "I had nine people create images for me, and combined them in a computer tablet, then took that three dimensional image and created the sculpture from that. It's all shields, made to look like marble, but not quite like marble. You can do that, too, you know."

"I can . . . ," he said, in shock.

"Yep. Neat effect, isn't it?" she said, casually.

"Oh, WOW!" he said. "I just asked my soul, and it showed me how to do it. But . . . I'M HUMAN!"

"Yes, and so am I," Muriel said. "You're getting a lot thrown at you in a short time. It took us years to come up with some of it. But it's all available to you. And you're deep linked to your soul. That's obvious from the fact that you're comfortable enough to ask your soul about how that effect is done." Ed looked at her. "Just a girl, Ed. Just a girl doing a job. And sometimes it helps to be outrageous doing it. And sometimes the solutions are outrageous, even if the intent isn't. Let's go meet these men."

And inside, at the entrance to the training room, Muriel calmly sailed in, singing out,

“Good Morning, gentlemen! Thank you for coming.”

“Well we didn't have a choice, did we,” a disgruntled voice answered.

“No, you didn't. But from here on out, you have a choice. The buildings you own or manage are sadly in need of repair,” she said as she reached the front of the group and turned to face them. “The Crown has taken notice of the condition, and is prepared to take them over as a health risk. That would, of course, mean that you'd be relinquishing them without any compensation. The whole time that you've been collecting rents in these buildings, you haven't put any of it toward repairing them. And believe me, His Majesty is ready, willing, and able to take charge, leaving you nothing except the possibility of criminal charges for renting out property that wasn't habitable. Well, you do have a choice. You can contract with a guild of contractors to use Envoy techniques to repair the buildings. Expensive, but not as expensive as having union contractors do the work. And the buildings will last longer than if union contractors do the work.”

“Yea, right. And where are we supposed to get the money?” asked the same voice.

“You already got it. If you no longer have it, then it simply proves that you never had any intention of keeping the buildings habitable,” Muriel said. “And that would ensure that criminal charges would be brought against you.”

“I'll offer you a different choice,” Ed suddenly spoke up. “My name is Ed, and I'm the resource officer for the Kidbrooke station of the Metropolitan Police.” And Muriel just grinned at him, her eyes sparkling. “With your permission we, my squad and I, will go in and fix up the flats. In fact, I have further help available to actually repair the buildings, one at a time. And that won't cost you a thing. We're doing it so that people will understand that police aren't just there to arrest people. That we actually do care about them, and want to help them. And we'll be using Envoy techniques to do it, so it won't cost the station anything but my time.”

“Boy! NOBODY gives something away without wanting something in return,” the grumbler said.

“You're right. There is something I want. You don't raise the rents or try other tricks to move people out so you can charge more to new renters,” Ed said. “You'd still have income from the property and wouldn't have to fix them up at your own expense. But you have to act, now. Either contract with the people that Muriel told you about, or let me and my squad do the work. Or, give up ownership to the Crown, and His Majesty will decide what's to be done. And with two of the choices you face the possibility of criminal action being taken against you.”

It took a little more haggling, but Ed and Muriel could see that their heart wasn't in it. The landlords were caught in a bind, and they saw what they thought was a way to 'stick it to the man' by getting the work done without having to pay for it. But they REALLY didn't like the idea of not raising the rents when the work was done. Muriel made it plain to them that if they raised them from this point on, the buildings WOULD be taken away from them by the Crown, and they WOULD face criminal charges. They were not going to make a windfall profit off of

Ed's work.

So it was a laughing Muriel that returned to Rob's office. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"GREAT!" Muriel said. I hit them with the bad news, and Ed played good cop to my bad cop," Muriel said, "and hit them with him and his squad going in and fixing up the flats. So, they signed the papers allowing it. And the papers state that they can't raise the rents, because they weren't the ones fixing up the place. Believe me, THAT little codicil caused some grumbles."

"I can bet. But as it is, the rates for those dumps are about the same as what I'm paying for mine. And that's further in toward the center of the city," Rob said. "So, where's Ed?"

"Fixing up his flat. With the door open," Muriel said. "The noise of the questions on 'where does this go' and 'how do you want this room' should draw in the neighbors. At least, that's what he thinks. Then word of mouth should carry it from there as the people see what's being done."

"You don't think so?" asked Rob.

"What I think is that it'll be all over the area by tomorrow night," Muriel said, laughing. "Perhaps even outside the area that the station covers."

"Oh, great!" Rob said. "How do we cover that?"

"We don't," Muriel said. "The area outside is better kept up, and the landlords actually DO fix things. And the rent is cheaper. Weird, isn't it? People pay more for trash than the would if they move a mile away."

"It doesn't make sense," Rob said.

"Yea, actually it does," Muriel said. "Habit. It's where they've always lived, and they don't want to move. At one time, the area that's a mile away cost more, so they moved here. Now, this is home. It's a community. They know each other, and look after each other as much as they can. And now, they've got a kid cop to help them."

"Yea. One that just a few days ago was ripping off welfare checks and busting heads with other neighborhood gangs. I have a hunch you can see where this is going," Rob said. "I just wish I could."

"Well, don't sweat it. Just let it run and see where it goes," Muriel said. "My bet is that he'll turn his friends in the gang. You may end up with some unlikely vigilantes that DON'T damage their opponents. You may even get a few more cops out of it, if they decide they like that kind of action, and like helping people for a change."

"Really?" asked Rob.

“Stranger things have happened,” Muriel said. “And not all of them were in the movies.”

“Well”

“Yea. You've got paperwork to do, and I ought to get back to my office before Taylor discovers that I'm not there,” Muriel chuckled. “He's still under the illusion that, because I'm female, I'm helpless and unable to defend myself. Despite the fact that I TAUGHT him all the dangerous tricks that he used to use. See ya later, Rob.”

Chapter 27

A City Reborn
(Friday morning)

“Well . . . he did it,” Muriel said.

“What?” asked Taylor

“Ed. Rob's new trainee,” Muriel said. “He started with his own apartment – cleaned and fixed it up so that his neighbors could see what was done. He didn't even have to ask if others wanted theirs fixed. They started flocking to him. So, he ended up doing the entire building where he lives. And Wednesday, other building's tenants came and asked him to do theirs. So, he got help from Home, and went through the entire area. Now, he's working on the parks and streets. Oh, and the gang the kid was part of got trained. Again, he had to call in help to get them all trained at once. Now, that same gang is going around cooling other gangs.”

“So, the violence in the area is being reduced?” asked Taylor.

“Yep. And the dissatisfaction with the 'government', too,” Muriel said. “And all because Rob 'took a walk'. Oh, and Rob's starting to weed out the bad apples in his station, too. Some of the crew took exception to Ed's friends simply walking down the street – this was after they were trained. They tried to arrest Ed's friends, and couldn't touch them. So they called back to the station for help 'apprehending these obviously criminal people'. Rob got wind of it, called Ed in, and the two of them went to the 'scene of the crime', and made some arrests.”

“Don't tell me. The people they arrested were the disgruntled cops,” Taylor said, laughing.

“Yep. They politely heard both sides of the story, and told the cops to go back to the station. And one of them shot at Rob. Only one. The rest were starting to draw when Rob sealed them all in shields, then calmly went around the bunch cuffing and disarming them. And pulled their badges right there in front of the crowd that had gathered,” Muriel said. “Made it very publicly and loudly obvious that they were not longer cops, and would be prosecuted for attempting a false arrest and firing on a superior officer. THEN, he apologized to Ed's friends on behalf of the Metropolitan Police.”

“So, how many of that station were affected?” asked Taylor.

“About half. Rob got in touch with the Commissioner, and got approval to use Envoys in uniform until he can get more Envoy trained people into the station,” Muriel said. “OH! And the Commissioner has instituted resource squads in some of the other areas. When he realized that all it cost was the wages of one person, and that it decreased crime in the area, dramatically, he felt it might be a good thing. Oh, the resource squads DO make arrests. But

when they do it's obvious that they're not going after 'little people. And the calm, quiet way that Ed arrests people is unnerving those that would commit crimes."

"Why would his being calm and quite unnerve them?" asked Taylor.

And Muriel laughed. "Because as soon as he gets information on a crime in progress he pulls a Marcia. He locks the perpetrators in shields, then translates in and quietly cuffs them and pronounces them arrested. You should see Marcia laughing over the fact that he's using HER techniques in such an understated way," she said. "And it's snowballing. Again, the Commissioner saw what was happening and how it was being done, and is instituting it all over the city."

"Well, on the other side, the contractor's guild is growing by leaps and bounds," Taylor said. "More and more contractors and workers are joining up. And they're literally taking work away from the union contractors. It's getting so that about the only crime being committed in the city is white collar crime. Fraud and embezzlement are up, simply because more is being reported. And Ralph is being kept busy investigating all of it. And he's reaching outside the city. So much of what he's investigating is large businesses and multi-nationals. And a lot of what he's investigating is going back to the banks and stock market."

"So what's happening in the rest of the world?" asked Muriel.

"Nothing special. Anna's crowing about her part in getting Rob functioning properly, of course," Taylor said. "And Fran's part in it, healing Rob the way she did, has caused more doctors to become trained all over the world. So the techniques are being passed on."

"Melanie wants to talk to you," Mata interjected.

"What about?" asked Muriel.

"She wouldn't say," Mata replied. "She doesn't sound worried, though."

"Well, it's early, there. Set it up for when she's awake," Muriel said. "I don't mind spending some time with a friend."

"Also," Mata added, "there are six more Enclaves established. It seems that, as the trained population density rises above sixty percent, governments suddenly want to acknowledge Ambassadors, and sign treaties with them. At least, that's the way it looks."

"Anything on the Japanese game company that was trying to shanghai Frankie and company," asked Muriel.

"Yea. They're going through bankruptcy. The government hit them with enough fines and regulations that they couldn't sustain themselves. That, along with the heads of the company being arrested on criminal charges. Then their stock tanked," Mata said. "And the officers of Frankie's distribution company all finally plead guilty when faced with the charges."

They're hoping for a reduced sentence. Fat lot of good that'll do them. Most of their sentence is in making restitution for financial mismanagement. They were siphoning off funds for themselves, and the courts want them to pay it back."

"So Frankie and company can go back to America, now?" asked Muriel.

"If they want to. So far, they're showing no signs of wanting to," Mata said, grinning. "And absolutely no signs of taking the distribution company back. Ted doesn't mind. It's all being handled through Triple E, anyway. And their games are selling well. Six workers and one boss, all Envoys. They're packaging up and sending out the games in droves. AND, they're sensitive to the market, and reporting back to Frankie what is selling and what isn't, and adjusting their stock accordingly. Frankie's over the moon about how well it's working out."

"Basically, what you're telling me is that it's time I got out and stirred up some more trouble or I'll be out of work," Muriel said.

"Now, would I say that?" asked Mata. "I'm happy when things are quiet. Oh, Taylor, it looks like you might get a Parliament early. A lot of the races are 'no contest' races. Trained people. The population finds out that they're trained, and simply walks away from the other candidate, and they end up dropping out."

"Lovely. I wonder how much of what I pushed through will get repealed," he said.

"Hopefully, none of it," Mata said. "From the look of it, your Parliament will primarily be trained people."

"What about the House of Lords?" asked Taylor.

"Oh, now that's the interesting part. Thank you for asking," Mata grinned. "The Lords, themselves, are passing the seat to their children. I don't know all the mechanics of your politics, yet. But what it amounts to is that the Lords aren't trained, but their children often are. THEY'RE the ones you'll be facing."

"Well, that's a good thing," Taylor said. "Maybe we can actually get some work done."

"So, what's Marcia and her troops working on, now?" asked Muriel.

"Mostly, finding lost articles and people," Mata said. "Tommy's being kept busy creating images for the crew to use. But all of them are involved."

"Hold on. I've got a call," Muriel said. "Hello? Millie! Hi. What can I do for you? Oh? Oh, my," she said, with an evil grin. "Yes, but I'd have to use a ghost horse, like we did at the Palace. No, no problem. Should I bring Taylor? Really? Oh, girl, you ARE becoming more confident. OK, then I might see if I can bring someone else, too. Oh, you'll see when we get there. Right. Bye. Taylor," she said, "we're going riding. Just a minute."

::Anna, are you busy?:: Muriel sent.

“Nope. What's up?” Anna replied, translating in.

“A little riding demonstration,” Muriel said. “A friend of mine, wife to our Crown Special Investigator is getting some harassment from the woman that was teaching her dressage, and failing. She asked if I'd come out and show the people at the stables how it's done. I'll do dressage and western. I'm dragging Taylor along to show more advanced dressage techniques. I thought it might be nice if you showed them Cossack riding.” And Anna got a wicked look on her face.

“Can I bring my troops?” she asked, and Muriel giggled.

“Oh, you bad girl. You're going to do a show, aren't you,” Muriel didn't ask. It was obvious. “Come western casual, or British if you prefer. Save the uniforms for the performance. You'll need your horse, too. Unless you want to do it with a ghost horse.”

“Nope. NO ghost horse. I wouldn't know how to control it. Mine knows my tricks and commands, and is used to translating. Can you give me an image of where to go to?” Anna asked.

“Yep. Here's where Millie told me to come to. I'll hold her there until you arrive,” Muriel said. And Anna translated out. “We'd better git. Anna isn't going to wait. And that mass of twenty-two people showing up might upset some people.” And Muriel and Taylor translated out, Muriel in formal dressage costume, and Taylor in casual clothes.

They translated in, Muriel and Taylor leading horses that were as different from the high-bred ones the stable had as Anna's would be. As they closed in on Millie, they both mounted, and casually rode up to where they could hear some overbearing woman berating her friend.

“Hi, Millie. Problems?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, my original teacher is going on about my being clumsy, awkward, and unable to do the simplest maneuvers despite my doing everything that you taught me,” Millie said.

Muriel looked the woman up and down, then said to her, “Do you ride?” And the woman sputtered. “Well, never mind. I'll be happy to show you that I CAN. Not only that, but that I've had more advanced training than you have. I brought a friend that taught me. And he IS an expert. Come,” she said to Taylor.

And they went to the large ring and began their routine with the normal, formal dressage maneuvers. This went on for about fifteen minutes, then they went on to the more advanced techniques used by a troop of famous white stallions – the war techniques used to keep a rider safe from ground troops. All in perfect synchronization. They ended their routine facing the opening they'd originally come through, but separated by some distance. There, the horses bowed, and Muriel and Taylor bowed to the crowd. Then the horses came back up

and stood, rock steady.

It was a good thing they did. There was a whoop, and suddenly a troop of wild riders came roaring right between them in full Cossack uniform. Anna gave Muriel a signal, and she and Taylor proceeded placidly out of the ring while these barbarians raced around them. And then the fun began. Anna and her troupe had had five years to perfect their routines, and they brought them off, flawlessly. Apparently, Anna had spotted where the kids were in the gathered crowd, because near the end of the performance, she had her troops drop Cossack hats on the ground near their locations. Then the troops exited the ring, while Anna proceeded around the ring, once, at a trot, then a second time at a canter. As she approached the opening, she let out another whoop and moved the horse to a gallop, then casually laid down the side of the horse and grabbed hats off the ground and tossed them to the kids. And did this all the way around the ring. Again at the opening, she re-seated herself in the saddle and pulled the horse into a tight turn, and stopped, facing the opening.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Anastasiya Khmelnytsky, Ambassador for Home to the people of Russia,” Muriel's voice rang out around the ring. “If there are kids in the audience that didn't receive a hat from her, please let us know.” Then, Muriel re-entered the ring in western costume and saddle.

What happened next was a display of a mixture of 'high school horse' tricks and western riding used to cut cattle from a herd. While this was going on, three of the Cossack troupe took barrels out and placed them down the center length of the course. As they left the ring, Muriel trotted toward one end, then started the pass so that she would cover both sides of the barrels – counter-clockwise around the first to line her up with the middle, which she passed on the left side of the barrel, then back out to go counter-clockwise around the third barrel. She made four complete circuits of the barrels, increasing from a trot, to a canter, and finally a 'neck or nothing' gallop that had her half standing in the stirrups, waiving her hat and whooping. She stopped after the last pass, and trotted the horse toward the opening.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Taylor's voice rang out, “Muriel, Leader of Home and Ambassador to the people of earth.” Then he rode out and joined her, facing the opening.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Anna's voice rang out. “His Majesty, Taylor, King of Britain.”

Muriel and Taylor exited the ring, and rode directly toward Millie's former teacher. There, Muriel dismounted and assumed her fighting Class A's. “Until you have mastered any of the three forms of riding that you've seen demonstrated here, today, it would be best that you not criticize the student of another teacher. You merely demonstrate your ignorance.”

“Hogwash,” the woman said. “It's all tricks!”

“Is it? I spent months learning how to ride like that,” Anna said, quietly. “And how to dance in the way of the Cossacks. I am one. What I do is not tricks. And you . . . you have the audacity to call your monarch a trickster? In my country that could land you in jail. But then, the Russian people expect something like that from their rulers. Here, I understand, there are different ways of handling it. Certainly, there are people, here, that would question

how good your teaching is, that you should question the ability of teachers of such standing as these. You. Come to my country and I will teach you real riding. If you can learn. If you have the strength and courage to learn. Or stay here in your cowardliness and fear. It matters not to me. But . . . IF you are brave enough to try, contact Ambassador Muriel, and she will see that you arrive safely in my country, and without cost to you. And if you DO decide to come, be prepared to work. This is not easy to learn, and your muscles will scream at you at first.” Then she said good-bye to Muriel and Taylor, and she and her squads mounted and left, translating out when they were a little ways down the road.

Muriel, on the other hand, ignored the teacher and addressed Millie. “You do not have to come here to ride. You can come to the Palace and ride there. I’m sure Taylor and I can find some place for you to practice dressage where you won’t be harassed by such as this. We stand by our friends, Millie. And you are our friend.”

“Ma’am,” said a young voice. “That other lady got away before I could get a hat.”

Muriel looked down, then dismounted and said, “Hi. I’m Muriel. What’s your name?”

“Oh, Jimmie, ma’am,” he replied.

“Well, Jimmie, I think I can help you out. But you have to call me by my name, first. I only do things like this for my friends, and my friends all call me Muriel,” she said.

Jimmie grinned, and said, “OK, Muriel.” And moments later, at Muriel’s request, Anna appeared in full Hetman uniform, and presented him with a hat.

“Thanks, Anna,” Muriel said.

“My fault. I knew he came in late, and my troops didn’t spot him,” Anna said. Then to Jimmie, “I’m sorry that I got away too soon to give this to you. Thank you for asking Muriel to let me know I’d missed you. We Ambassadors like to keep our promises.” Then she stepped back and translated out.

“That was neatly done,” Taylor said. “How come that trick doesn’t work with adults?”

“More inhibitions,” Muriel said. “Kids have less, and the manner of pulling it off is a kid thing. They’re more focused on what they want and less on how things appear to others. Let’s get out of here. I think we’ve done enough damage to these poor people’s psyches.” And they translated out.

Chapter 28

The Scene of the Crime

(Friday afternoon)

Muriel and Taylor had just finished lunch in Taylor's office when Mata alerted her to a phone call from Melanie. Muriel asked her to transfer it up to her. "Melanie! Sheesh, girl, this is early for you. What can I do for you?"

"We've been watching the stock tank on that company that tried to grab the programmers," Melanie replied. "Both here, and in Japan, the stock is down to pennies, now. Is there any way that you can grab it?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure. Let me check with Ted. We just pulled a rather expensive stunt here in Britain involving a private equity and three banks. And I'm not sure I'd know what to do with that gaming company," Muriel replied.

"It's not just games," Melanie replied. "They were into all sorts of things including hardware and various entertainment things like music disks and movies. They've also tried to play fast and loose with various laws in this country, and were even caught out with installing software on computers that effectively killed the computers. It was on their music disks. Years ago, they used to be a GOOD company. Then, they got greedy. The trouble is that a lot of that hardware out there is under warranty, and if the company goes down a LOT of people could be hurt by this. And that's not counting all the other things that it's been into."

"OK, let me talk to Ted, and see what he thinks," Muriel said. ::Ted, what's happening with that Japanese company that tried to grab Frankie and her friends? Melanie's on the phone, and is trying to push us to buying it.::

::I've been watching that. I don't know that we could get it away from the Japanese,:: he sent back. ::Somebody is playing the market, heavily, and buying up stock faster than we can. And we can't find out who it is. My squads are going crazy trying to track it. We may have to let this one go.::

::OK, I'll tell her what's happening. Thanks,:: Muriel sent. "Melanie, Ted's been trying to buy up stock. Someone else is out there buying it faster than he can, and he can't track who it is. We may not be able to do anything."

"Somebody's trying to buy it up? American or Japanese stock?" asked Melanie.

"I don't know. He didn't say. Hold on," Muriel replied. ::Ted, is it American or Japanese stock they're buying up?::

::American. I hadn't even thought about the Japanese stock,:: he replied. ::Hold on.::

"Melanie," Muriel said, "Ted says American. He's checking on the Japanese stock

situation, now.”

“AMERICAN? Wait a minute. Let me check on something.” And she left the phone.

::Muriel,:: Ted sent, ::Japanese stock hasn't been touched. We're grabbing it, now. And I just realized that the American stock is on the American distribution companies. We'll dump it. If we've got the Japanese stock, that's on the parent corporation.::

“Muriel, are you still there? We found them. And there's ties to the company and to the patent and copyright troll that were trying to grab the company your friends owned. We're getting ready to roll them up on accessory charges,” Melanie said. “Thanks.” And she hung up.

::Muriel, we got it,:: Ted said. ::I'll be taking action, today, to get it sewn up. It's going to take some juggling, so be patient with me. We have to do it in such a way that the officers of the company involved in the criminal activities are still charged, but the company, itself, isn't affected. I've got a legal team in Japan working on it.::

::Thanks. Melanie found the ones that were buying up the American stock. They may be involved in the attempt to grab Frankie and their companies. I don't have any details, yet. But it looks like she's got somebody going after them on charges of accessory,:: Muriel sent back.

::OK, I'll hold our American stock until we can find out if the rest is freed up. Thanks.:: And Ted dropped out of her mind.

“WHEW! OK, now I feel like a pigeon in a badminton match. Battered from both sides,” Muriel said.

“What happened?” asked Taylor.

“Melanie wanted Home to pick up that Japanese company that was trying to grab Frankie and her friends. Ted was working the American stock. Didn't even think about Japan and the fact that the parent company was there. He's just switched off and bought up the Japanese stock, and is trying to figure out how to take the company without being implicated in the criminal charges against the officers,” Muriel said. “In the mean time, Melanie discovered who was buying up the American stock ahead of Ted, and is in the process of rolling them up as accessories to the criminal proceedings.”

“Oh, my. Isn't that a multi-national company?” asked Taylor.

“Yep. Now, I'm wondering what he'll do with it,” Muriel said. “This is all happening too fast. I think I need to get to my office and see if I can get any better information.”

“Go. There's nothing on for this afternoon that you would be involved in,” Taylor said. “Let me know if there's anything I can do to help.”

"I'll do that. Thanks." And Muriel translated out.

Back in her office, Muriel tried something that she hadn't tried, before. She reached for her soul and asked IT what was going on. And got a humorously grumbled 'about time' attitude back. And then was floored by the massive amount of information she received. The source of the American stock buy ups was the very Japanese distributors that were being investigated for being accessories to the attempted take-over of Frankie and her friends, and their distribution company. Japan was foundering as hundreds of people were buying the company's stock at below asking price. Then it suddenly stopped.

Information replaced the stock reports. Information that she had NO idea how she was getting, but none the less was there. Action against the officers of the company had suddenly halted. The officers, it would appear, were dead. Apparently, by their own hand.

Then, just as suddenly, things shifted again, and Ted was announcing that the company was now under the control of Triple E, and sent the workers home with two weeks paid vacation. This included management, but a close investigation of them was also being conducted. Ted put Envoys in place as upper management and security, and pulled all the records, sending them back to the American Enclave and that warehouse prison that doubled as storage for evidence. Muriel could feel Frederica sending Envoys to search and record the information in them.

Then, something closer. Something calling her. ::Come on, girl. Come on back,:: she heard in her head. ::Too much, too soon. You know better than this. Come on back. Just concentrate on your office. Come on. Open your eyes:: And there was a familiar feeling to the mental voice. Mata. It was Mata, and she was worried about her. And, slowly, she opened her eyes and looked at the worried face of her friend and security chief.

"Girl, you ought to be spanked," grumbled Mata. "You left it too open ended, and were getting everything at once. I'm surprised I could even get you back.

"Sorry, Mata. How long was I out?" Muriel asked.

"Only a couple of minutes. But when I was getting an echo from you, I knew what you had done. You might have gotten away with it if you'd restricted the request. But you left it open ended, and weren't used to it or how to control it," Mata said.

"So, will you teach me?" asked Muriel. And, at the skeptical look on Mata's face, added, "I'll just keep trying until I learn, anyway, you know." And then she looked past Mata. In her office and spilling out into the quad outside were people. Her friends. Ted. ALL the people that she'd made Ambassadors.

"All right, people. I'm fine. Honest. But now I know how it's done," Muriel said. "All I need is control. Go on. I'm fine. Go back to what you were doing. I'm sorry I caused you to worry. Really. I am." And the crowd began to disperse. Slowly, as if they weren't quite sure they believed her. And, as they left, she saw that there were hundreds of Envoys behind them. "Come on, people. I admit it. It was a fool thing to do. So, I'll learn. Go on. Go back

to your jobs, where you're needed. I appreciate that you care, but I'm OK now. Really."

"Are you? Are you standing up or sitting down?" asked Mata.

"I'm . . . I'm standing up. But I'm taller than I should be," Muriel said. Then took stock of herself, and resumed her normal height as she realized that she had grown to twice her normal size. And the world began to really come back into focus. "There. Better?"

"Yea," Mata grumbled. Then she grabbed Muriel in a hug, and Muriel could feel that she was crying.

"It's OK, Mata," Muriel murmured. "I'm back. I'm really back. Thank you, my friend. I'm sorry I worried you like that. Will you show me how to do it right? Please? So it doesn't happen again?"

"Yes," Mata's voice came, muffled by Muriel's shoulder. "Yes. I'll have to. You could slip into it again, now that you've done it once. But now you know how security chiefs get their information. And to a degree, how your squads get it. Just let me get it together again."

"I'm sorry, Mata. I really am. I didn't know," Muriel said.

"I know. Not your fault. I should have realized that at some point you'd make the connection with how we do it. And Az always was impetuous. He probably even grumbled at you that it was about time you tried," Mata said. And Muriel laughed, nervously.

"Yea. It did. But it was with humor, too," Muriel said.

"OK. Let me go. I'll be all right, now," Mata said. "Jeff was right to stop development on advancing his computers. We're not that far removed from them. And yes, this is how the computers get their information. But the implication with the computers is to sort it out, not get it as one whole gulp. That's the big difference. The computers have a built-in limiter to do that, and to only go just so far. You put no limit on it. If you'd asked your soul to limit it, I probably wouldn't even have noticed. But no limits. It was like . . . I don't know . . . like watching your child stand on the edge of a cliff and look down, and wonder if he could fly. Without training. Give me a minute. I'll give you the dump that the security chiefs get that helps them limit it. Pass it to your soul. I may add a few nasty words for your soul for not protecting you, though."

"Feel free. Add a few to me, too, for being stupid," Muriel said.

"Not stupid. Uninformed," Mata said. "My fault, really. I'm sorry. I should have told you, sooner. I KNEW how you could be."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Mata," Muriel said. "This won't count against you. I don't think it'll count against me, either. Just dumb, stupid luck that I happened to pick this particular time to try it."

"Well, you've found the source of our knowledge – our ability to find information quickly. It would be best if you filtered your requests through your computer, or phone, or even your tablet from now on, though. They'll give you the same information without overwhelming you. Basically, if it's on earth, anywhere, or on the mesh mind, anywhere, it can find it and retrieve it. No matter what the format," Mata said.

"Thanks, Mata. Yea, I'll do that. But it's nice to know that I CAN go directly to the source," Muriel said.

"Yea. For you, I guess it would be," Mata said. "If for no other reason than to scare the life out of me," she added, smiling. "Go, sit down. Let Chuck bring you something."

"OK," Muriel said, and sat down in her recliner.

"OK, people. Quit looking shell-shocked and get back to work," Mata said to the room. "Crisis is over."

Then, Muriel noticed that Taylor was there. "Oh, gad! Sorry, Taylor. I'm really sorry. I won't do it again."

"Yea. You will," he said, but he wasn't hollering at her. "You will. 'It's in your nature'. If not this, then something else. And I can't ask you to be careful. And no, I won't go away or let you go away to protect me from it. Just know that I'll always be here. But if you felt this lost and alone when I'd pull some bone-headed stunt because I wasn't thinking, then I understand why you were so hard on me until I learned to look out for myself. No, that didn't come out right."

"Yea. It did. And I did. And sometimes it was tough. But you HAD to grow up and stand on your own two feet," Muriel said. "Otherwise, you'd always have been dependent on me, and not able to do YOUR job."

"Yea. And now I understand why you were so adamant about our not being married," he said. "I mean, deep down understand. We both had to be free to do our jobs. There couldn't be the tangle that people were trying to push us into."

"I'm sorry I scared you. I think I probably would have come out of it, anyway, shortly," Muriel said. "I was running out of new information on what I was looking for."

"Maybe. I doubt we'll ever know, now. But it doesn't matter. You're back," he said.

"I'm back. And smarter than I was, and a bit more cautious," Muriel smiled. "I'll try to think of consequences a little more before I try something new."

"If you two lovebirds are through, now, I've got a few choice words for you, Muriel," Melanie said. "That little stunt pulled me out of a meeting, and now I've got to try to regain my position with the clods."

"Oh, Melanie, I'm sorry," Muriel said.

"Shut up. I'm not done, yet," Melanie said. "Muriel, whether you know it or not – whether you will acknowledge it or not – you aren't just the Leader of Home. You're the Leader of Earth, too. Billions of people look to you for guidance and information. And help. And when you suddenly aren't there, they hurt. No, you didn't do it on purpose. And it won't count against you. I can see that in your balance. You don't have anything to be sorry for. But . . . this is the same reason why the President has guards around him . . . or her. To keep the unexpected away. In your case, it's your security chief and squads. THEY'RE your protectors. And mostly, it's to protect you from yourself. And yes, my Secret Service squad is here, right outside. They KNOW I'm safe in here. And that's the thing that you really have to understand. YOUR squads may not have to worry about physical attacks on you. They have to worry about what you could do to yourself."

"You're saying that I should pass things by them, more," Muriel said.

"Yea. You, too, Taylor. But mostly you, Muriel," Melanie said. "Because it isn't just you, now. You're going to have a baby."

"WHAT!"

"Oh, not right away. And no, you're not pregnant. Yet. But it's going to happen," Melanie said. "DON'T ask me how I know, and don't go looking. But I know it's going to happen, and I happen to know what soul it will be. So, please, don't do something stupid? Please? Mata and your squads are a resource. You've gotten along fine until recently. You've asked for help and information, and they've given it to you. That's their job. Please let them do it?"

"OK, Melanie. I'm sorry. I'll do it," Muriel said. "Is there any way I can help you with the clods? To pay you back for pulling you out like that?"

"No. Not really. If you showed up, they'd panic," Melanie said. "It's the heads of a few multi-nationals that you haven't tangled with, yet. But they know about you. They think that they can get around you by convincing me to let them go their own way. NOT going to happen. I might call you in later, if I need to. In fact, I may just let them know that I was talking to you. Maybe that will scare them enough that they'll behave for a while. Well look, I've got to go back."

"Thanks, Melanie," Muriel said.

"Hey, it's what friends are for," Melanie said, and translated out.

Chapter 29

The Multi-nationals Strike Back

(Monday morning)

“Well, it finally happened,” Mata said. “The multi-national corporations have decided to quit stabbing each other in the back long enough to try to stab YOU in the back.”

“They haven't learned from the mistakes of others?” asked Muriel.

“Apparently not,” Mata replied. “They've decided to create a coalition. They want to force you to release all the companies under the Triple E banner back to the stock market. They're going after Taylor, too, for forcing out the businesses in Britain. They're claiming it's interfering with the free trade agreements.”

“Balderdash! Trade is freer now than it was under them,” Muriel said. “Mata, this isn't coming from the multi-nationals. It's coming from the banks.”

“What? Why?” asked Mata.

“Because they were always the ones driving the stock market, for their own profit,” Muriel said. “Whenever restrictions were put on the way they operated, they found some hidden way of doing the same thing. Hedge funds. Private equity. All ways to try to control the market. So, where are you getting the information from?”

“Melanie. That's what the meeting was about that you pulled her away from,” Mata said. “She finally got to the bottom of it, and told them 'no'.”

“It's not the multi-nationals,” Muriel repeated. “Is Melanie busy right now? I think I should drop in on her.”

“Ask her,” Mata replied.

::Melanie? Are you busy?: Muriel sent.

::Shortly, why?: Melanie responded.

::It's not the multi-nationals. It's the banks. They're trying to gain control of the market, again,:: Muriel replied.

::Why, those sneaky little devils. Muriel, are you busy?: Melanie sent, laughing.

::Why, no. Not right at the moment. Is there something I can do for you?: Muriel sent back, KNOWING where this was going.

::Well, perhaps you'd like to visit for a bit,:: Melanie sent. ::With at least one squad.

Four if you can spare them.: *OH, MY!* thought Muriel.

::Well, let me check my schedule, and I'll see what we can do,:: Muriel said. ::When would you like me?::

::How about NOW!:: Melanie sent.

::On the way,:: Muriel sent back, laughing.

"Mata."

"I heard. Four squads, Formals. Muriel, you might want to use your Fighting Formals, too." Mata said. And they translated to Melanie's office.

"Girl, it's been too long since you visited me. You used to visit my predecessor, more often," Melanie said.

"Yea, but he got into more trouble," Muriel replied.

"Hmm. I don't know if I've been complimented or insulted," Melanie said.

"Oh, complimented, of course," Muriel replied, laughing.

"Never mind. The prey is approaching. Try to leave the pelt so I can nail it to my door," Melanie said.

"Madam President," a male voice said, preceding a well-fed individual in an expensive suit. "Thank you so much for . . . WHAT'S SHE DOING HERE!"

"Mister Butler, I really don't think it's appropriate to comment on who I have in my office," Melanie said.

"I expected this to be a private meeting," Butler replied, indignantly.

"I'm sure you did. However, that's not something that I acquiesced to. And, in fact, we may be able to get to the bottom of what you are trying to do much quicker with the Ambassador here. So," Melanie said, "make your argument."

"In fact," Muriel said, "why don't you start with who you're ACTUALLY representing. We know it isn't any corporation or group of corporations, so you don't have to tell us that lie."

"YOUNG LADY! I AM NOT HERE TO TALK TO YOU!" he bellowed.

"No. You're not. You're here to 'instruct'," and Muriel made the 'air quotes' gesture, "President Carter on how she should run the country. You've already tried Congress, and struck out, there. Guess what. Gonna happen again."

"Madam President, I object to the presence of this . . . woman at this meeting. I insist that you have her removed. At once," he said, drawing himself up and attempting to pull in his stomach.

"Insist, is it?" Melanie said, softly. "You really DO tend to get above yourself. This is my office. I invite whom I choose. You've tried to get a ground swell going with the population. That didn't work out very well for you. Then you tried congress, and that was worse. You were literally told to leave and not come back. Now, you're trying me, and you start right off by making the mistake of trying to tell me what to do in my own office. BIG mistake. You'll notice that I've never taken any money from either the corporations or the banks," she said, and watched him wince slightly. "Muriel, what have you found out about this man?"

"He represents a consortium, but not of corporations. It's banks. They want their outrageous profits back," Muriel said. "Oh, I'm getting this from my security chief, Melanie. Not directly. Anyway, he was sent here to try to convince you that allowing the privatization of corporations was against the free trade agreement or the constitution, or whatever bullshit he thinks would sway you to 'force' Home to relinquish control of businesses that are finally making money. They want to play with them on the stock market, again, while strangling them and the American people. Well, not really just the American people. But that's what he's going to try to tell you, is that it's in the best interest of the American people to serve the banks by providing lots of money without being provided with anything."

"Well, Mister Butler? That's it, isn't it? You think to play word games with me because I'm not a lawyer. Guess again. I got my law degree seven years ago, and passed the bar. I also got a lot of other degrees over the course of my friendship with 'this woman'. Muriel is more than you know. And has more degrees than you can ever hope to achieve. And she tells it like it is, not as you'd like to paint over it. Muriel, acting as the President of the United States, I am hereby requesting that you pull a complete investigation of the banks in this country, and also their behavior with regard to other countries. I am activating the 'Special Investigator' clause of the treaty between Home and this country, and allowing you to use any and all means at your disposal to complete this investigation. I understand that this may take some time, but I would request that a preliminary report be in my hands within two weeks if possible."

Mata quietly tapped Muriel on the shoulder and, when she turned her head, handed her a DVD. Muriel handed it to Melanie, reaching across the desk, and noting that the security detail didn't even glitch at the breach of protocol but remained standing quietly against the walls. However, Mister Butler DID glitch.

"Problem, Mister Butler?" asked Muriel.

"There's no way that you could have gotten enough to fill a CD so quickly," he said.

"You're right. It's a DVD. And, from what my security chief told me, it's full," Muriel replied. And Butler blanched. "You really have no idea how much information is available to us. Well . . . Melanie, that shows all the banks and their connections, in and out of the

country. It also shows corporations that they control through owning the board members, and the possible directions they'll try to go in, next. Highest probability is some sort of smear campaign against Home, followed by a possible smear campaign against your government and you. Possible way to combat these is a preemptive strike against them by disclosing this information to the public, outlining their connections and the purpose of their campaign. You may also find enough information, there, to simply start arresting officers and closing banks and corporations. I'll leave that up to you, though. In any case, it's interesting reading."

"Mister Butler," Melanie said, "I believe this concludes our meeting. I would hope that we never meet again, and that the banks and corporations learn that they can't keep getting golden eggs when they've killed the goose. And besides, the goose objects, and is apt to goose you. Good day. Get out." Butler left. VERY disgruntled, and muttering to himself. Anyone would think that he was trying to compose the lies he'd have to tell the banks when he got back to them.

Melanie turned to Muriel and just looked at her, then laughed. "You, kid, are something else. But you've changed. No feathers, no claws, nothing. What happened?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just that I've grown up, some. Besides, this was more outrageous than it looked," Muriel said. "By the way, that really does include all the stuff I said. Mata told me that they're still investigating the corporations. But ALL the banks are there."

"How'd you get it so fast?" asked Melanie.

"Mata's been working on this from the other side. We've got a problem in Britain, and an investigator looking at it for us. Mata simply put his findings together with hers, and reformatted to show it from the point of view of America," Muriel said. "Part of this was what caused us to take down that private equity firm in Britain, and Ted is going after the three banks that were tied to it, now. We should have some results, shortly."

"We included the banks that we already own," Mata said, "and their links to businesses. Those links, though, are strictly investment. No control or influence. You'll see when you go looking at it."

"You're saying that we can roll them all up at once," Melanie said.

"Well, maybe not all of them. There ARE honest businesses out there. Mostly, little ones that the banks don't feel are worth bothering with," Muriel said. "But yea, you can definitely put a dent in some of the practices. It might be best if it were coordinated with other countries, too. That way there's no vestiges of them left. When we took down three at once, before, we only took on the American branches of them. Unfortunately. Because the ones foreign to America simply changed names and continued their practices, and came back into this country."

"Hmm. I see what you mean. Much like what you're trying to do to that Japanese company," Melanie said.

"Yep. Exactly. Oh, it's possible that we should have dug deeper, and seen who was controlling them before we moved. But we really didn't have time. The criminal action was already in play, and the stock was tanking," Muriel said.

"Anything I can do to help?" asked Melanie.

"I don't know. Oh, you did know that it was the distributors that were buying up the American stock, didn't you?" Muriel asked.

"Nope. But I do, now. Got anything more on it?" Melanie asked.

"I don't. But Mata might. Mata?" asked Muriel.

"Yep. Here you go. Again, there's links involved. They were trying to hold the price at a certain level," Mata said, handing Melanie a CD. "They failed in that. Ted did some damage to the price level. But basically, they're out of the stock market at this point. They've bought back ninety-seven percent of their outstanding stock. We're still trying to find out what they intend, next. On the other side, Ted has closed down the Japanese plants, and frozen all stock, there. He also got all the records, and they make for interesting reading, including who was responsible for the computer program on the audio disks that destroyed hundreds of computers."

"How is he keeping Home out of the criminal charges?" asked Melanie.

"The way he bought it, mostly," Mata said. "He made it plain to the government and the prosecutors that once Home took control, it was not the same company that it had been. They balked at it, but he simply told them that they could have the company and lose all the potential taxes and income from them. Or they could let him have it on his terms and gain those taxes and income. I think what finally swayed them was the fact that he WOULD turn over any evidence implicating the principals, and they could do what ever they wanted about clawing back the money from them. He did warn them that if they reneged on the deal, which he made them sign, that he would close down the company and walk away from it."

"OUCH!" Melanie said. "Has Ted been taking Muriel pills? That sounds like the sort of choice SHE'D give them."

"Naw," Muriel said. "He just noticed that the government of Japan is pretty much run by the corporations. And they've been balking at cleaning up their act for a long time. This is a major company in Japan, and if it folds then a lot of the government's money will just dry up and blow away. They know it. And he let them know that HE knows it. Basically, it's the old 'change or die' argument that we've used all along. Without this company, whose tentacles are everywhere, there would essentially BE no government. The company does more than just make and market the retail machines. A lot of what they do are sub-systems of other devices, and those companies would fold, too, if this one went down. They simply got caught on their own spiderweb that they built for themselves. It's using their own force against them. And, it's a foothold for Home. Like licking your finger and marking the air, saying 'that's one'."

“Does Ted realize that?” asked Melanie.

“Of course. Who do you think taught me?” Muriel said. “Look at the treaty, sometime. I mean REALLY look at it. All the way along, we’ve been making offers that people couldn’t refuse. And all the way along, it’s been to provide something better for ALL the people,” Muriel said. “Well, I probably ought to get out of here and let you get on with your real job.”

“Yea. Chewing out whoever allowed that last one to make an appointment, to start with. And making sure that there are no further boggles like this,” Melanie said. “All future appointments must be approved by me, or they’re out. Take it easy, Muriel,” she added with a wave. And Muriel and the squads translated out.

Chapter 30

The Trial That Should Never Have Been

(Monday afternoon, a week later)

It took three days, not including jury selection. The first day, the prosecution stated its case, and the defense stated its. Then the prosecution began establishing facts. First, that the programmers had a mutual agreement – a contract – agreeing to work together and share the proceeds. Second that they had established a company to sell and distribute their programs, and the limits of authority and responsibility that the distribution company had – including that they were never given the copyrights, nor were the programmers employees of the distribution company. Third, that documents had been forged attempting to show that they were employees, and that the copyrights belonged to the distribution company. Fourth, that the distribution company hired people to attempt to abduct the chief programmer in order to try to force the others to sign the false documents.

Then it was the defenses turn on the second day. The defense presented all its 'should haves' and 'it's the way it always is' arguments. The prosecution rebutted the arguments on the third day, hammering on the facts, and the jury was sent out to deliberate. They were nice. They took the time to hit the restrooms before they deliberated. Then returned to the jury box with a verdict. Total time, thirty minutes. This also allowed the defense the opportunity to hit the restrooms and save face by not peeing their pants when they heard the verdict. Guilty on all charges – and the verdict was unanimous, as shown by a poll of the jury.

Though not voiced at this trial, it was a foregone conclusion what the sentences would be. With all the charges of fraud, forgery, abduction and such, those men would be away for a very long time. In fact, considering their age, it was doubtful that they'd breath free air again. Hitchcock was noted for 'no parole' sentences when the defense flubbed it this badly. An appeal was expected, but not likely to pass the 'sniff test' of the Appeals Court. Hitchcock had been scrupulous in adhering to the procedures, and the letter of the law. And the trial was actually calm, considering the way the hearing had been.

Alice, the lawyer, Muriel, representing Home, and the programmers, representing themselves, all translated back to Muriel's office. "Well, that went well. Long, but well," Muriel said.

"Oh, this is nothing. There are legends of cases that have gone for generations," Alice said. "Charles Dickens wrote a novel called 'Bleak House'. One of the possible sources for that book was Jennens versus Jennens, which was in the British court system from 1798 to 1915 – a total of 117 years – and only ended when the money in the estate ran out. If you take thirty years as a generation, then it was almost four generations long. There have been others"

"GEEZ!" Mike said, "how do you know these things?"

"I'm a lawyer. I've always wanted to be one. So, as a teenager, I read whatever I could

find about law. 'Bleak House' was one of them. And I couldn't believe that such a thing could happen. I happened to mention it to one of my professors in law school. He put me in touch with the Jennens versus Jennens case. It's one that almost proves Muriel's theory that the only winners in any type of case are the lawyers. They bled an entire estate dry with their time and court costs. And the court paid them out of the estate," she ended, softly.

"Are there any honest lawyers?" Mike continued, not noticing the rather bleak look on Alice's face.

She shook her head, as if clearing it of something. "I'd like to think so, Mike," Alice said. "I'd like to think that I'm one. Yea, I make money at this. But I'm not bleeding anyone. Home set up the office and staffed it. I'm part of the staff. My pay doesn't depend on some poor sucker spending the rest of his life trying to pay off a debt. I was so happy when this strange outfit called me, shortly after I graduated, and asked me to come to work for them. But I had NO idea what I was getting into. I learned. Fast. The pay was good, and my assignment was outrageous." And Muriel snickered.

"Yea," she said. "And a pain in the ass."

"Not really," Alice said. "You listened. You learned what I needed, and I learned what you needed. And I was energized. You can't believe how it felt to suddenly be tossed at an Ambassador and told that you're the one that's going to keep her out of trouble. I figured I was so junior that it would be years before I got the head of one of the stores as my client. But, then, you started coming up with hard evidence for me to use to do my job. You never told me – how'd you know to do that?"

"Henry. Adam. Tex. Melanie, mostly, but Henry was the one that simplified it for me, until I could get the course that showed me what he needed for evidence," Muriel said. "So, I knew the what, but not the why until Henry sat me down and talked to me. Why do you THINK I'll listen to anybody. Everyone has a story, so the story goes. I've got news for you. Everyone has something to teach."

"You're kidding!" Mike said.

"Nope. I've learned a lot from people, and it's helped me to be able to reach some of the most fragile personalities and help them strengthen themselves," Muriel said. "It also helped me to understand some of the most focused personalities," she added, looking at Frankie. And the programmers laughed. "And it helped me understand my friends and myself. Especially myself. Early on, I recognized that I was very much dead set against bullies. I'd seen enough of them in the couple of years that I developed the friendship of twelve exceptional people. So, when I had the chance to sit back and really look at them, what drove them, what I liked about them, what they liked about me . . . well, I learned all I could. And that's the reason for things like psychology and sociology up there on my wall. So, some of the nervous banter went away. Some of the outrageousness went away, too. I didn't need the crutches any more."

"Yea, and you recognized that I was still relying on them, and forced me to walk on my

own,” Taylor said from the back of the crowd.

“TAYLOR! Come sit,” Muriel said.

“Does that mean that you're going to stop talking?” he asked.

“Well . . . if you insist,” Muriel said.

“Then I'd rather stay here,” he said, grinning. “I'm finally learning something about you that I didn't know. I want to hear more.”

“Idiot. Come sit. Ask questions,” Muriel said. “Just make sure they're questions that can be answered in public.” And the programmers and Alice laughed. Taylor didn't. But he also didn't need to ask those questions. He just smiled, and went over to his usual chair.

“So, you said Henry was the one that actually taught you the why of hard evidence,” Alice said.

“Yea. He sat me down and gave me the FBI procedures. And no, I don't have a certificate for them,” Muriel said. “I knew I'd never need it, and there was a lot more that I would have to have taken to become a special agent. Just don't tell Marcia, but he gave that to me when I was twelve. Then sat me down and gave me the REASONS for each of the procedures. What constituted hard evidence. Why it was necessary. How to handle it and keep it secure. And suddenly, I knew what it was that YOU needed, Alice. At least some of it. You taught me the rest – the law side of it. But he was the one that made it easier on both of us.”

“You're still outrageous, though,” Taylor said. “The whole thing at the stable with Millie and her former teacher. THAT was outrageous.”

“Yep. But I didn't pull the most outrageous part of it. That was Anna. And for her, that ISN'T outrageous. It's merely normal. It's how she pays the bills. You may not realize it, but the money she raises going on tour really pays for her Enclave. At least for those things that cost money. She does the same sort of thing that I do with my pay,” Muriel said. “She uses it to fund small businesses, and help the destitute. But our part? That was just build-up to her coming in and showing off.”

“Are there any other Ambassadors that do that?” asked Mike.

“All of them, in one way or another. Each country is a different society – a different culture. There are similarities. But there's also enough differences that each handles things in a different way,” Muriel said. “Ameera sponsors college age kids in colleges outside Iran. The one in Brazil endows chairs in universities, there, and scholarships for students. Li Chun pours hers back into the country, getting things that the country needs that they can't make on their own. Like teachers in various disciplines. Oh, all of us use a little for ourselves. Going out to dinner at a restaurant that isn't in an Enclave, for example. Or a concert. Lots of small things. But that doesn't even pull down the interest on the accumulated pay.”

"Yes, and presents for her poor neglected parents, too," Lily said, as she and Fred stood by Mata's desk, grinning. "Daughter, this office is magnificent."

"Thank Carla, then," Muriel said. "She put it together for me in about a half an hour."

"Sorry we couldn't get over here earlier," Lily said. "We had a rather full schedule with our crowd. Oh, nothing serious. And no, we're not getting in trouble again. But we've spent the past couple of months researching some of the changes that have taken place since you were trained. And it's amazing how they built on each other."

"You should have asked. I think Mata could give you the full rundown, complete with notes and how to do them," Muriel said.

"Well, actually," Lily said, "we did. And she did. But that's just the dry 'here's how you do it'. What we did was to relate it to what caused you to feel the need of something more. WHY did you come up with something new. And we discovered that it wasn't always a crisis. In fact, some of the reasons were rather whimsical. And even some of the serious things you came up with were used in a whimsical way. We also discovered that you didn't come up with everything, alone. You seemed to work off of advances of others as well. Just as they worked off of you. It was fascinating to see the interplay between you, your friends and even some of your students."

"Well, some of it was just obvious extensions. SOME of it, I'll admit, took some thought, some looking at what had been done before, and saying 'how is that possible'," Muriel said. "But most of it was just cases of, well, if I can do this, can I do that."

"Daughter, what would you say is the most important thing you came up with?" asked Fred.

"Oh, that's simple. And you were the one that gave me the clue. Changing the shields from six flat panels to one capsule," Muriel said. "It was you talking about a curved surface being stronger than a flat one – talking about the way arch bridges are built and why submarines basically look like a sausage with add-ons. That was a major breakthrough for the Envoys, and I didn't even realize it when I did it. But then an Air Force General topped that by finding out how to anchor it to the universe so that it couldn't be affected by outside forces. But that wasn't the most important discovery. That would go to Jeff, when he discovered that shields were semi-intelligent."

"It's interesting that you don't consider the development of weapons as important," her father said.

"PFFFT! Weapons are everywhere. ANYTHING can be made into a weapon. Even shields," Muriel said. "No, that's interesting in an academic sort of way. But essentially not really that important. No, what's important to me is the ability to protect, and the means to extend intelligent thought. No, I'll take that back. There is another, and it's easily overlooked. The application and manipulation of power to cure or fix people. And for that, you'd have to

thank Mark and Fran. What they do are wonders that really don't jump up and hit you in the eyes until you see them do something impossible, like make it possible for a paraplegic to walk again. That's startling."

"How?" asked her father.

"Oh, it's a radical extension of speed healing, which Mark came up with. Well, you know that from the way you two were cured of some nasty diseases," Muriel said. "And Anna used that as the basis to be able to build muscle mass fast enough to keep up with her teachers in dance and riding. But when faced with a paraplegic that had been confined to a wheelchair for two years due to an accident that broke his back, Fran was going to regrow the nerves one at a time by speed healing from outside. And Mark came up with the idea of just turning the whole thing over to the man's soul, and letting IT do the healing from inside, where it could be monitored. And it worked."

"He can walk again?" her startled father asked.

"Walk, run, dance, chase his wife around the kitchen table, saunter He's now the station chief at one of the Metropolitan Police stations, and taught a new probationary officer how to use Carla's techniques to fix up flats and buildings. Another thinker that's taking off on previous advances," Muriel said, pouring on the praise. "And that's now being instituted all over the city and region, giving the police a whole new look as being people that care about people, not just arrest them."

"So, you're changing society," her father said.

"Ah! So THAT'S what this is about. Change? Yes. But not by changing the basic culture, but by eliminating some of the worst aspects of society by example," Muriel said. "The changes are to let people become what they are capable of being. And that may change the society of a country a bit, but not necessarily the basic culture. A fantasy author hammered through a whole series of books that there is no one true way. Well, she was talking about religion. But really, it applies to cultures, too. And there is power in diversity. It's possible that, sometime in the future, earth will settle down to one culture. But I would hope that it allows and respects the diversity of people and their expression of that diversity. Humans have created great beauty in various ways. The architecture of China is not the same as Russia or America. And none of them are 'the one way' to build. And each has its own beauty."

"So, what is it that you would change?" Lily asked.

"The negatives. The greed. The need to control other people. The need for regulating every aspect of a population's daily lives. In short, the bullies of the world," Muriel said. "Those that would try to 'cheat the system' for their own gain, and at the expense of others. That's what I would see change. It doesn't stop individuals from being different, or doing more than others might. That's part of the individual personality, interests, and abilities. But forcing others down as a means of elevating one's self is just wrong."

“And that's why this trial was actually as short as it was,” Mata said. “Muriel learned what Alice needed for the law, based on what Henry needed for evidence to present to a lawyer, then hammered us with producing it. Well, hammered the way she does, in her gentle way. She just kept after us to nail down every possibility. As a result, Alice had so much evidence in this case that the jury only took fifteen minutes of actual deliberation to come to a verdict. And all because Muriel learns and applies what she learns, and develops off of that new things that others learn and feed back to her.”

“Mata,” Fred spoke up, “would you say that our darling daughter is exceptional?”

“Watch it, Mata,” Frankie quipped. “That one was loaded.” And Mata laughed.

“Yes and no. Many people do the same thing in their own way,” Mata said. “Even Frankie, who develops programs based on things she's learned about other programs. So, Muriel isn't unique. But she is exceptional in her application of what she's learned. She isn't always right. But she's always building off her own work and the work of others, finding new ways to do things. There are others like her, of course. And they're all exceptional, too, in that they aren't content with what's traditional – the way things have always been. And they prompt others to be the same way. What makes her exceptional isn't so much what she does as it is that she's part of a very small percentage of the population that behaves this way. Worse, she even prompts Envoys to behave this way.” And the crowd chuckled at the way Mata grumbled the last statement. And Mata grinned back at them.

“Well guys,” Frankie said, “We ought to get out of here and let these people be. Besides, we need to get back to work on that new game.” And they translated out.

“Well,” Lily said, “we should probably leave, too.”

“Do you have to, mom?” asked Muriel. “You could stay. We could put you up, here. Then you could see the office, and the Palace. Maybe some of the sights of London.”

“But, wouldn't that put you to too much trouble?” asked Lily.

“Really, Lily,” Fred said. “Aside from the fact that a Palace probably has more servants than we've seen people in our lives, both Taylor and Muriel have Envoys and can ask for more. Honey, we'd be happy to stay for a while and see the sights. After all, we may never get the chance, again.”

“Taylor?” Muriel asked.

“All ready on it. Saul's setting up a suite for them, and it should be ready, shortly,” Taylor said. “Everything else can be worked out, I'm sure. So, let us show you around.”

Chapter 31

The Best of All Possible Worlds

(Tuesday morning)

"You've got all your things packed?" asked Muriel.

"Already sent back to our apartments," Frankie replied.

"Your equipment?"

"Already back in place and set up."

"You know how to get ahold of Ted or Frederica?"

"Really, Muriel, we're not children, you know," Frankie said, exasperated.

"Oh, good. And everybody's had a pee break? It's a long trip back," Muriel asked. And that did it. The programmers cracked up. "Seriously, guys, I'll miss you. Even if you couldn't teach me programming, it still was fun."

"We know how to find you. And we may just take vacations over here," Frankie said. "The people are friendly, the food is good, if strange. And then there's always you," she added.

"AH! Entertainment value. I KNEW I was good for something," Muriel said, and the laughter rang out again.

"Can I ask? How do you do that? You manage to turn cuts around like they were nothing, and make them ridiculous in the process," Mike asked.

"Simple. I'm not afraid to make fun of myself," Muriel said. "Makes it easier. Also makes me less threatening."

"Yea, well we ought to go while we've got the chance," Frankie said. "This way, nobody knows that we came in in an unorthodox manner."

"You DO know that you're allowed to use the techniques, don't you?" Muriel asked. "Those that have them won't question. Those that don't might, and you might pick up a trainee along the way, that way. And with your shields, you're not going to get hurt by those that might take offense."

"You just want us to stay longer," Frankie said. "But we really should go. You people have done enough for us, and we need to get back to some serious work. That game isn't going to write itself, you know. Look, we WILL be back. NOBODY turns down an open invitation to just 'drop in' from a King and a Leader of a whole other world. So, let us go do

what we need to do. OK?”

“Yea, I guess it'll have to do,” Muriel said in mock dejection. Then grinned. “Safe trip and good luck with the program. I hope I gave you enough information. If not, holler, and I'll come bug you.”

“We'll do that. Thanks. Thanks for everything. Bye,” Frankie said, and the others waived, and they all translated out. Muriel slowly walked back into her office.

“Problems?” asked Mata.

“Hmm? Oh. No. Just a warm feeling. We did good,” Muriel said. “We don't often get involved where we aren't directly affected. But this time it was worth it. Even if we did have to buy a company to make it work.”

“So, what's on, now?” asked Mata.

“I don't know. We got those three banks that Ralph alerted us to. And the others have either straightened out or are hiding it better. Millie's in seventh heaven about the horses, here, and how eager they are to do dressage. “Let's see,” Muriel added. “Oh, George and Mary. You wouldn't believe how well they're working out. Alice said that productivity has improved a hundred percent since they came on board. And they're always finding new and better ways of doing their jobs. Rob and Ed are going crazy fixing up their area and training troops to take over in the station. Who'd I miss. OH! Ada. Her first book will be coming out in about six months. She sent me a copy of the manuscript. Not bad. Not my normal taste, but I can see where some people would like it.”

“Well, that's the people you've already helped. What about the ones you HAVEN'T helped?” asked Mata.

“Good point. Did we ever get doctors going, here?” Muriel asked.

“We tried. They couldn't get licensed. And the hospitals and such won't accept the University of Home diploma or the Home Medical license,” Mata said.

“Then that's our next target. Grab a squad, and see if you can get an image of the office of the administrator for the first one. We'll 'drop in' on him. Blue coats and hats. We're going in as 'Special Investigators'.” And moments later, they were in an administrator's office.

“Good morning!” Muriel sang out.

“I don't know who you are or how you got in here, but you can just leave. Now,” the man behind the desk said.

“Oh, really. Well, I'll just let His Majesty know that you have no intention of following the law, and suggest that he close down this facility as being unable to come up to standards,” Muriel said.

“WAIT! What?” he said.

“Special Investigator to the Crown. I'm here to find out why you are denying privileges to qualified doctors, in violation to the findings of a recent Crown inquiry and subsequent re-evaluation of the licensing agreements and their also subsequent rewriting. I'm sure you received a copy of the pertinent parts of that document,” Muriel said.

“I know no such thing!” the administrator said. “Medical practices are licensed by the Medical Board of Britain. They're the only ones with the authority to license doctors.”

“Those licenses are based on substandard medical practices,” Muriel replied. “Practices that have little changed in the past generation because it serves to profit certain educational and pharmaceutical industries, as well as medical and insurance industries. There are practices that have been proven to be more effective and less costly. And the practitioners of such practices are duly licensed by the only medical board currently in existence to be able to evaluate them. You are denying them the opportunity to provide those practices to patients in your hospital. You are, in effect, denying patients the opportunity to recover from disease and trauma. And your unwillingness to accept the new licensing standards will be noted in my report to His Majesty. I'm sure he'll be interested in seeing my findings.”

“You're talking about that quackery that some outlandish place that nobody has ever heard of and may not exist has come up with,” he said.

“No,” Muriel singsonged, slightly. “I'm talking about the techniques developed by humans and Envoys based on the combined research and development of the medical board of Home, and under the auspices of the University of Home.”

“Yea, that's what I said. Quackery. Nobody's ever heard of this Home place, or been there. Nobody has ever checked these so called techniques to see if they work,” he said.

“Actually, that's not true,” Muriel replied. “Many countries now acknowledge that the procedures practiced by doctors licensed by the medical board of Home are more effective than those currently practiced in backward countries like Britain. America was the first to acknowledge this, and others have verified it and changed their licensing policies as a result. In fact, this is the last of what are termed the Western countries to hold to the old standard. In addition, it's been discovered that as much disease seems to come OUT of the hospitals as goes in. No, I'll simply report my findings to His Majesty, and let him decide if this hospital will continue to be allowed to stay open.”

“Muriel?” came a familiar male voice. A VERY familiar male voice. “What have you gotten into, now?” it added. Then Taylor looked around and said, “Oh. Largest hospital in Britain. And they don't allow Envoy trained and licensed doctors to practice. OK, how long would it take to clear the hospital of it's patients?”

“About an hour, not counting the time to actually get them home,” Mata replied. “There

are sufficient doctors to see all the patients in that time and get them cured and fixed up.”

“OK, shut it down. No new admissions until the hospital is under new management. Get the doctors in, and have these patients taken care of and translated out,” Taylor said.

“And just who the hell are you?” asked the administrator.

“Oh, sorry. I probably should have introduced myself,” Taylor said, switching to his formal outfit, complete with crown. “My name is Taylor, otherwise known as His Majesty, Taylor, first of that name, King of Britain. Mata, could I prevail upon you to secure all the records of this hospital, please.”

“Done, sir. Records, both paper and computer, are locked down and available for your inspection,” Mata replied.

“Thank you. Sorry, Muriel, I probably should have passed that through you, first,” Taylor said.

“Nope. It was requested politely, and Mata has standing orders to accede to reasonable requests,” Muriel said. “And that was a request, and nicely worded. I’m not going to boggle over technicalities for something like this. So, what do you want to do with this place?”

“Probably turn it into a nursing home,” Taylor said. “I’ll just make sure that there is competent administration here when I do.”

“You can’t do that! There are sick and injured people here! You can’t just throw them out!” the administrator said.

“Oh, don’t worry. They won’t be sick and injured when they leave,” Taylor said. “I’m quite familiar with the abilities of doctors trained in Envoy style medicine. We’ll even provide transportation for them. And yes, Mata, I already put in the request. Envoys are coming to provide transportation, and in some cases will stay with the patients until family arrives.”

“And what do we do with this obstructionist trash?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, that one’s simple. We simply let the board of directors know that they’re out of a job because of this person’s inability to read and understand the King’s English. I’m sure they’ll be so pleased that they’ll be all over themselves to give him his due,” Taylor said, dryly. “In other words, for losing them the hospital and their large salaries, they’d can him and probably won’t even give him severance pay, much less the bonuses he thinks he deserves.”

“That seems a bit extreme, Taylor,” Muriel said.

“Oh, I know. But you’ve got to realize that they put him in this place to guarantee their salaries. THAT’S what he administers. The rest is just subsequent to it,” Taylor said. “And they don’t feel that the hospital can make money off the Envoy techniques. THAT’S why he

won't allow Envoy trained doctors to practice, here. Plus, it makes the doddering old fools, here, look bad when they can't save the life of someone with a hang-nail, and even YOU can save the life of an accident victim that's near death. It's another case of 'that's just not the way it's done'. Meaning that somebody would be losing their exorbitant pay for fiddling around instead of healing people. Nope. You put your finger right on the problem, and I have the solution. Hospitals that insist on taking the stand that doctors trained by the University of Home and licensed by the medical licensing board of Home aren't qualified to work there will be turned into nursing homes with an emergency clinic to deal with internal and external patients and staffed by Envoy trained people."

"But . . . you don't understand! We HAVE to keep the regular doctors on. People don't trust these new style doctors," said the administrator.

"Translation," Muriel said, "YOU don't trust them, because you don't know what they do or how they do it. Your real complaint is that admissions took a severe hit about five years ago, because the number of Envoy trained people in the country jumped to about seventy percent over two days. It's higher now. And Envoy trained people don't get sick. And rarely have accidents that would require a doctor. As a result, your charges went up, to the point where many insurance companies just won't do business with you. That puts the burden on the little guy. And in this economy, a lot of them can't afford medical care. Well, you no longer have to worry about that. Doctors trained in Envoy medical techniques don't require expensive equipment and tests. Nor do they require admissions, as a general rule. So . . . ten doctors in the emergency room, and trained staff to take care of the elderly and those not able to take care of themselves. You're a nursing home."

"The board would have to vote on this," he said defiantly.

"The board is overruled. You had your chance," Taylor said. "And the board knows that. My office called them when it became obvious what the problem and solution were," Taylor said. "Muriel, what's the status on the patients?"

"She wouldn't know," Mata said. "No offense, Muriel, but you weren't following that, and I was. Seventy percent have been discharged as cured. The rest are being attended to right now. Reception and accounting are screaming that insurance won't cover the 'new' procedures. I sent Nancy to let reception know that they are now superfluous, and accounting was told that it was no longer their problem. And she made sure the records were locked down. Give us the rest of today to clear out the records, and you'd be free to start admissions for the nursing home. We can set up the E.R. immediately. In fact, I believe it's already done. Half the nurses already have the Envoy medical training. Come to find out, they are actually doctors that couldn't get work because of people like him," Mata added, pointing to the administrator. "And this clown and his co-clowns have been holding people longer than they needed to be held, just to justify their charges to the insurance companies. They were already cured by the nurses."

"WHAT! I'll have them up on charges!" the administrator said.

"Nope. You won't," Taylor said. "You had your chance. You no longer run this place.

It's been taken over by the crown until honest management can be put in place. Medicine is big business that has been milking the public for too long. Muriel, I'll be speaking to the insurance companies, next. I'd like you to join me."

"No problem, Taylor. Tell me where and when, and I'll be there," Muriel said. "I'm always up for a good fight. This one, though unfortunately long, was rather pathetic. I hope you can set up a better one. I haven't had a chance to be outrageous in a long time," she added, grinning.

"I know what you're suffering from," Taylor said. "You're under the impression that you can achieve the unachievable. What you want is the 'best of all possible worlds'. But Leibniz was discredited a LONG time ago. And in satire, at that. Ever read 'Candide', by Voltaire?"

"Nope. Didn't know that either one of them existed," Muriel replied. "How do YOU know about them?"

"The benefits of a classical education, dontchaknow," Taylor replied in his fake, upper-crust accent. And Muriel hit him.

Chapter 32

The Effect of Uncertainty on Objectives

(Wednesday afternoon)

“Come right in, gentlemen. And lady. Find a seat,” Taylor said. “Over here in the center, please. I’m not going to strain my voice to be heard all over this barn. I’ll admit that it’s a bit ornate, and seldom used except for gatherings before state dinners and such. There we go,” he added, heartily, as the last of the involuntary guests were seated.”

“Now, then,” he went on, “as I’m sure you know, the woman on my right is my consort. Her name is Muriel, and she’s the Leader of Home and Ambassador to the people of earth. And, as this discussion concerns the Citizens of Home, I think you can understand why she’s present. Now to define those that are called the Citizens of Home. Basically, they are those humans that have traveled to Home and returned under their own power. This is the final part of the basic Envoy training that is available to anyone who can make a mental connection with a trainer. There is another category of Citizens of Home that was established, recently, and that is those that are residents of Home – the Envoys who ARE the training and have aided humans in training others. This basic training can be added to, rather handily, by the courses offered by the University of Home – a university, I might add, that is fully accredited in Britain. Some of the courses that are offered would require licensing here, on earth. And since the methods of practicing those disciplines is different from earthly methods, the only ones qualified to license such individuals are those designated by the University of Home.”

“Now, I’m sure that you are wondering what I’m leading up to,” Taylor said. “Simply this. There has been at least one discipline that you have refused to recognize, either as a discipline or as being validly licensed. I assure you that, in this country, their licenses ARE recognized as valid, and your refusal to so recognize them has led to some confusion in our society. In fact, one of the principal disciplines which would most benefit this country is medicine.”

“Now, your business is to provide funds for occasional situations that might arise. Specifically, illness and injury. And you accomplish this by taking in money from customers, and then being reluctant to part with it. Your objective is to make money, not give it away. Therefore you attempt to reduce the effects of uncertainty on your objective of making money by providing massive restrictions on the conditions under which you will part with it. And one of those restrictions is that you are not accepting the ministrations of Envoy trained doctors as being valid.

“Tell me, gentlemen and lady. How uncertain would your future be if your companies were closed because you refused to accept the accreditation and licensing of thoroughly trained people? Well, actually, I’ll tell you,” Taylor added. “I think your futures would be thoroughly certain. You’d be out of work, and the funds would be returned to your customers. And, should it be found that the companies didn’t have sufficient funds to cover such a debt, the remainder would come out of your personal finances.”

"I DO hope I make myself clear on that point. But just to be sure, let me phrase it slightly differently," Taylor said. "Either you accept the accreditation and licensing of Home, immediately, or you will be shut down, and will be sued for any difference between the funds your companies have on hand and what is needed to refund your customers. This is called 'risk management'," he added, looking into the faces of the shocked crowd. "You are providing the risk, and I'm providing the management. You and your ilk have managed to turn Britain into one of the most backward countries on earth, because of your greed. And don't even think to try to move funds to a location that can't be found. We already know, to the penny, where all the funds are, including those supposed 'tax havens' that people of business so love. Now, are there any questions?"

"Yes," the woman said. "We have no idea as to the schedule of charges that these . . . people would foist on us. Nor have we come to any agreement with them as to what portion of those charges we would pay."

Muriel just smiled. "Actually, the schedule of payments was issued to each of your companies five years ago," she said. "I know, because that schedule was first calculated for America, then translated into local currency of all the countries on earth, based on what the average income of its residents was. We have upgraded that, every year, with respect to the effects of the bouncing economy on each country. You received the last update just six weeks ago."

"What? THOSE? Outrageous," the woman said. "Thoroughly outrageous. You never even tried to come to an agreement with us concerning the charges. THAT'S the reason that we refuse to acknowledge these so called Envoy trained doctors. It has nothing to do with their accreditation or licensing."

"You know? I have a shovel that smells strongly of the sort of bovine byproduct that you're spouting," Muriel said. "We sent you the schedule. You never made a counter offer. And the reason you didn't is because the charges we proposed were significantly lower than the charges for the same results by a doctor trained in earthly methods and procedures. You couldn't hide your manipulations in them."

"WELL! I don't have to stay here and listen to these ridiculous charges," the woman said, gathering up her purse and getting up.

"No, you don't have to stay," Taylor said. "Please leave your name and company name with the Envoy at the door on your way out, so we will know who to take action against. Or SIT DOWN and realize that you are now in the REAL world and WILL comply with orders." Muriel reached over and put her hand on his arm. He looked at her for a moment then nodded.

"I think I know what your problem is, madam," Muriel said, standing up. "You've never seen what Envoy training can do, and you're too set in your ways to ask. So, you deny that it even exists. Now . . . I am not a doctor. However, early on in the aftermath of my original training I suggested that it might be a good idea if some of us could have a first aid course that would be able to handle emergencies, accidents, and armed assault. And an Envoy

doctor put his mind to it and came up with what came to be called a 'battlefield first aid course'. Do any of you gentlemen have a penknife? No? Well, then, would one of you test this to be sure it's sharp?" she said, holding up a rather large knife fashioned like those used in hunting. One man came up and looked at it, tested its edge, then licked his thumbnail and ran the edge over it, checking for burrs and rough spots, then handed it back.

Muriel took the knife and slashed her palm, holding it up for the crowd to see. The bleeding stopped, and in fact the blood disappeared. And the people watched as the wound closed, not even leaving a scar.

"Now, that's just from a first aid course. What the Envoy trained doctors have is as far above this as a PhD in engineering is above a ten year old boy fixing his bicycle," Muriel said. "A friend of mine restored a young man to walking two years after he'd had an accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down. I've seen others cured of cancer. I watched that same friend save a man's life on a flattened out recliner in my office. Without cutting. He had a heart attack, and his heart stopped. One of her squad kept the man's blood circulating and oxygenated. Another removed stents and repaired damaged arteries. And she healed his heart, then went all over him, checking to make sure that everything was up to par or better. He was standing up five minutes later."

"Envoy techniques in medicine work. Without cutting. Without drugs. Without long periods of convalescence," she said. "And you could have seen proof of this at anytime you wanted, because we have records of such things. You have what I would call 'willful ignorance'. You chose not to learn, because that might affect your 'bottom line'. Well, Taylor, the King, has decided that if you won't learn, then your bottom line will look much worse, and so will your futures. Your choice. I really don't care. Home could just as easily have gone into the insurance business. We'd pay out, because we are NOT a profit oriented organization. Home doesn't operate on a cash economy. Their setup is entirely different."

"The Citizens of Home are human. But they are different from you. And that difference is because they've learned that they are more than what they thought they were," Muriel added. "They have no interest in ruling the world or being rich or having people worship them. They have no interest in the things that motivate you. But they do have rights. And you . . . you that sit here and try to rationalize away your crimes . . . you have wrongs. It's time for you to correct those wrongs. I will tell you this only once," she concluded, "either you find a way to pay the meager costs of health care provided by Envoy trained doctors or Home will take over your businesses and make the payments for you. And we will do it perfectly legally. If we have to take that step, then we will find a way to claw back all the funds you've amassed by denying claims to people that trusted you."

"Gentlemen and lady, you are excused. Get out of here and do what you have to do. And be assured that so will I. You have a choice, right now. Choose wisely," Taylor said. And slowly, stunned, the crowd left. Muriel stood, watching, until the last was gone.

"Was it necessary to cut your hand?" Taylor asked, concerned.

"Yes. They'd never seen what Envoy techniques could do. It isn't something I LIKE

doing. It hurts. But what they're doing to those trained doctors and to your population hurts more. It's worth it to me to go through a little pain for a greater good," Muriel said. "It's all right, Taylor. It's healed, and doesn't hurt any more."

"It hurts me to see you do it, though," he said.

"Yes. I'm sorry," she said. "I should have found another way to demonstrate that without you being around."

"You're saying that you still would have done it, just not with me there," he said.

"Yes. It needed to be done. They had to realize that there are things outside their narrow view of the universe. And that I meant business," Muriel said.

"Then I'm sorry for even telling you that it hurt me," he said.

"Don't be. I DO understand. And I understand your feelings as well as your wish to protect me," Muriel said. "But I haven't needed protection since I was twelve. Ask Mata. The squads were set up to protect me until I could protect myself. And they lost their function in the first day. After that, they were just to impress the impressionable and intimidate the intimidaters. Ask Mata, or any of them. They'll tell you. They were the first of the Envoys to follow me. To tell you the truth, I think I scared them a bit. At least at first."

"It's true, Taylor," Mata said, coming in. "She hasn't needed physical protection since we taught her to find her power and build shields. And then she taught us. Now THAT scared us. We thought that we knew all there was to know about the techniques that we taught, and suddenly we came to realize that a twelve year old girl had just taught us something better. That there was something that humans could do that we couldn't. But we never feared for her life or health after that. The closest we've come to really fearing for her was when she went into a depression over what she did to a mass of business and religious leaders. And really it wasn't even because of them that she was depressed. It was because of the massed military dead that surrounded them. She felt their pain."

"And even then, she did something about it. It took time for her to figure it out, but she found a way, first, to make it easier for people to face their Judgment after death. And later, found a way to give the souls of the dead a purpose – to take them back out of themselves and into working with others," Mata said. "You want to talk about scary? She scares us all the time. But it's not FOR her that we're scared. It's what she could actually do if she DID want to rule. She's human, and subject to all the frailties of mind that humans have. And she knows it. You can't teach such an attitude so that one knows when to pull back from wanting to be the paramount one. But she has it. It's why she always says that she's just a woman – just a girl doing a job."

"And sometimes, doing the job means being hurt a little, so that others can understand that there's more to life than what they thought," Muriel said.

"Well, then, I'll just have to share your hurt in my own way," Taylor said. "I DO

understand what you're saying. And I think you understand what I'm saying, too."

"Oh, yea. No question," Muriel said. "It's just that we can't always save someone we love from a hurt, especially when it's a hurt that's self-inflicted. It's one of the things that I learned from Caleb, when I was twelve. That's what happened with the military in Home. Most of their hurt was self-inflicted, because they were upset at being dead. But, between me and a living military officer talking to Sergeant Carter, they found a new purpose – a new reason to live even if they didn't have bodies. It's made a difference there. And it's making a difference, here. Kids are being born and raised that are just coming into their connection. They're the ones we DON'T have to reach, unless they are connecting without anyone to help them."

"You know," Muriel added, "you talked about the effect of uncertainty on objectives, earlier. I've had to deal with that since I was trained. The objective was clear – get people trained. The uncertainty was getting the training accepted by the population. And the effects have whipsawed back and forth for all that time. Still are, really. Yet, more and more people are getting to that objective – getting trained. We've tried to show people in business that their objectives could be reached easier by getting out of the stock market and not using litigation as a weapon. But these are people that CAN'T be trained. They're so far gone that there's nothing I can do. No way I can convince them that there are better ways, and that 'more money' is not an answer, nor is it even a valid objective. People learn that when they get trained. When the need to scrabble for a living no longer exists, they find themselves reaching out to others. THAT'S what I'm trying to do, now."

"You've shifted focus," Taylor said.

"Some. That focus was always there, just eclipsed by the need to get people trained," Muriel said. "So, how can we show them that there are things they can do to help others, without costing them anything?"

"Isn't that what you're doing with Ed?" asked Taylor.

"Yea, and Rob. But that's what – two out of millions?" asked Muriel.

"But they're teaching others. Maybe you didn't get the report, but the gang that Ed belonged to is fully trained, and doing the same sort of thing in the area," Taylor said. "In fact, they asked how to approach landlords OUTSIDE the area, to allow them to help fix up flats."

"No, I hadn't heard that," Muriel said.

"Well, that's only part of the report. Rob told me that about a third of the station's compliment were trainable, and are now trained. That, coupled with his 'stealing' graduates right out of the academy and getting them trained, then dumping the various courses into them has improved the attitude of the whole area," Taylor said. "Smythe has started getting other stations to change the way they appear to the population, too. It seems to be working. Oh, there's still crime, but much less than there was. And they're only 'tough cops' when they have to be. The rest of the time they're much like Nadeeda's attitude – walk around in a fancy

uniform and point out where the restrooms are. Or find lost kids. The mayor of London's office is looking at Smythe with wonder. Sometimes that avalanche is started by a very small snowball."

"Snow? What's that?" Muriel asked, grinning. "I'm from Arizona."

"Goof!"

"Slave driver!"

"Masochist!"

"Must be," Muriel said. "I hooked up with you, didn't I? Feeling better now?"

"Yea, I guess," Taylor replied.

"Good! Because I'm starving. Where are we having dinner?" Muriel asked.

Chapter 33

The Objections to the Uncertainty of Effects

(Thursday morning)

::Muriel, can you come to my office,:: Taylor asked.

::Be right there,:: she responded, and translated to his door and walked in. "Hi, hon. What's up?"

"We're starting to get some flack from the insurance companies," Taylor said. "They've started a smear campaign against Envoys and Envoy trained humans. And they've started it in the very area that needs the help the most – the poor and out of work. They're claiming that the Envoy trained humans are taking the jobs of those people. And, as an example, are saying that your demonstration was the excuse we used for firing the doctors from the hospital. They're claiming that you're 'healing yourself' was just a bunch of fish oil."

"Snake oil. But I get your meaning. They're saying that I was a fraud, and that the Envoy trained doctors are quacks," Muriel said. "Well . . . what do I do, now?"

"Well, the one thing you DON'T do is panic," Taylor said. "You've got records of people being healed, don't you?"

"Oh, sure. And either they're too graphic for the media, or they look like people are just standing around, doing nothing," Muriel said. "Too easy to claim that they're a hoax. Even the graphic ones look more like something that came out of a bad movie."

"All right, think about it from the standpoint of a lawyer. Do you have any evidence to back up your claims?" he asked.

"Some, maybe. Accident and fire scenes, no. They could claim it was staged. However, medical records . . . maybe. But we'd have to get permission from the people to use them. And most of them are in America," Muriel said.

"There's got to be a way," Taylor said.

"Well, don't bust yourself up over it," Muriel replied. "Let it rest. Something will come to us. We can take the hit, right now. Enough people know the truth, that I don't think the smear campaign will go very far. And meetings, today?"

"Nope. Why?" Taylor asked.

"Because I don't have anything going, either. So I thought I'd take a walk," she said.

"You DO know that every time you take a walk you get into trouble," Taylor said.

"Of course. That's the fun part of taking a walk," Muriel quipped back.

"Very well. Bring Mata," Taylor said.

"Of course. She's been following me around like a faithful hound ever since she figured out that where I was was where the action was," Muriel said. "I think there's only once since then that I was able to keep her away. Have you got something to wear that doesn't scream "KING" to everybody?"

"Oh, I think I can find something appropriate. I'll meet you at your office. Dress nice," he added, getting in his own dig.

"Oh, I'm sure I can find something," Muriel said, mysteriously, and translated out before he could question her.

As she translated into her office, she changed into a dusky red version of the pinafore that Mata had worn. And Mata looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "You do know that you'll give the men a heart attack, don't you?"

"Can't be any worse than the one you gave them when you wore the tan version," Muriel said.

"Yes, but I didn't form fit mine. And it's windy out there. That dress is going to be everywhere but down," Mata said, changing into a lavender pantsuit, like the one Muriel had worn that day.

"Shields," Muriel said, echoing Mata's thought from the last time. "It's all done with shields. I tell the dress to stay down, and it'll stay down."

"Well, here comes your lover-boy, and it looks like he's trying for a different look, entirely," Mata said. "The old double breasted calvary look, right out of one of those old westerns, I think. But in white and done as a shirt. Tight pants – don't look down, you'll only blush." And Muriel hit her.

"I can look all I want to. It's legal, now," Muriel said.

"And I do believe those are cowboy boots he's wearing," Mata concluded.

"Yea. But flats, not healed," Muriel noted.

"OK, I'm going as your mother or older sister. He's obviously the rebellious suitor, and you're the 'sweet yang thaing'. TRY to behave yourself," Mata grinned.

And that's when Taylor reached the door. And stopped stock still. And it wasn't the door that claimed a victim.

"Um, Taylor?" Muriel said, trying hard not to laugh, "you might want to loosen your

pants a bit. Otherwise something valuable might get crushed. Or bent, anyway.” Mata just snickered, and Taylor turned beet red and quickly turned and faced away from them.

“There ought to be a law against women,” he finally managed to choke out. “Could you at least lower the hem about two inches? Please?”

“Very well. But I think you might need a hat, Tex. That sunburn you’ve got looks fierce,” Muriel giggled, and put a tan cowboy hat on his head.

“I do hope Mata’s going with us,” Tex said.

“Oh? Why?” asked Muriel

“Because you’ll need protection,” Taylor said.

“Really? I haven’t really needed protection all these years,” Muriel said.

“You’ll need the protection from me,” Taylor said.

“Aw! That’s nice. A girl like to know that she can get a rise out of a man,” Muriel said, and giggled again.

“You’re not helping things at all, you know,” Taylor said.

“Oh? And how would you like me to help things?” Muriel asked, coming up behind him and putting her arms around him, softly.

“Can we just go? Please? Hopefully somewhere where there’s lots going on, to take my mind off what’s going on?” Taylor said, moving away from her. And Muriel laughed.

The street they translated to wasn’t really crowded, but it was definitely busy. Even with personal shields, people were constantly trying to walk into them or blocking their way. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry and not watching where they were going.

“Are there sales going on, here, or something,” Muriel asked.

“Not that I can see. But this is one of the more popular tourist areas of town,” Taylor said. “No, I think this is just a normal day, here. Traffic’s heavy, too. Strange. What IS going on?”

“Hold on, there’s a Met officer over there,” Muriel said. “I’ll just ask him.”

“Muriel!” Taylor said, but it was too late, she’d already taken off.

“Hi,” he heard her say, “What’s going on? People seem a bit crazy out here, today.”

“Oh, hello miss. Oh, nothing special. Just tourists. It gets like this, sometimes.

Should calm down in a bit, now,” he said. When suddenly there was a scream of tires followed by a scream of people, and the officer took off toward the sound. Muriel switched to her uniform, and flew above the crowd to the source of the noise, followed closely by Taylor and Mata.

::Mata, we need Envoys and doctors, fast,:: Muriel sent. ::Looks like someone stepped or was pushed off the curb in front of a bus, and it swerved to avoid her. We've got injuries and people trapped.::

::On it,:: Mata said.

::I'm calling in the regiment doctors,:: Taylor replied at the same time, and suddenly there were green uniforms around the bus.

::Oh, gad! Get a space cleared,:: Muriel said. ::Stop the traffic and get the road cleared. It's the only place to work on them.:: And shortly, the cars and trucks were blocked off by Met officers, and Envoys started pulling people out through the windows – the least hurt, first, moving them back toward the crowd. More gray uniforms showed up, as Muriel's squads arrived and took charge of the ones being pulled out. They got the victims set down in created chairs, and green clad doctors started dealing with scrapes and bruises.

::Mata, some of these people are trapped under the bus. Arms and such. And we've got some head trauma inside. We need more doctors!:: Muriel sent.

::They're here. Civilians. Some were in the crowd. The rest came from wherever,:: Mata sent back. ::Envoys are pulling the more critical ones out, now. There are pads set up in the street for them, and the doctors are going there.:: Muriel glanced over, and saw people being put on the pads and covered with blankets – the color of the blanket indicating the seriousness of the injuries. The Met officer had seemed a bit in shock, but was gamely trying to keep people out of the way. He was the reason that more Met officers had showed up to block off traffic.

::Muriel,:: Mata sent, ::The worst of those that are free are out, now. All that's left are the three who's arms are trapped.::

::Great! Get doctors in there to stop the bleeding and control the patients while the Envoys lift them both out,:: Muriel sent back. ::Have I got three Envoys to lift the bus?::

::Yes,:: Chuck sent back. ::My squad's on it. Six inches or so, until the victims are free of the bus, then we'll put it upright when the area's clear.::

::Thanks, Chuck,:: Muriel sent back, kneeling by one victim, and working on him. Taylor was two pads over, doing the same thing with another. Suddenly, three more pads appeared, and were shortly occupied by two children and an adult, and doctors were working on crushed arms and head trauma. The children were quickly joined by other victims from the sideline – parents wanting to know how their kids were – and they were being soothed and comforted by Envoys from Betty's squad. Muriel finished up with her patient, who was now

sitting up but somewhat dazed. A civilian came over to her.

"I'll take this, miss. Normal shock. Got five of us, here, and more on the way, to help reduce the shock. Only take a moment or two. You did a nice job on this one," she said.

"Thanks. Lots of practice," Muriel said, and gave the woman a tired smile.

"May I ask why you've had so much practice at it?" the woman asked, kneeling down by the victim and beginning to work on her shock.

"Oh. Sorry. My name is Muriel, and I'm from Arizona. We have lots of accidents there," Muriel said.

"Muriel," the woman said. "Arizona. WAIT! You're THAT Muriel? The Ambassador?"

"Guilty as charged," Muriel said, regaining some strength and a better attitude. "We just happened to be in the area when this happened. So I called for reinforcements."

"About done there, dear?" Taylor asked, obviously having been relieved of his patient by a doctor.

The woman looked up at him, and said, "I don't believe this. First the Ambassador, and now Your Majesty?"

"Of course," Taylor said. "Muriel and I haven't worked together on something like this, before, but we seem to have meshed pretty well. Besides, where else would I be but at my consort's side?"

"Um . . . if you don't mind my saying, sir, that's a rather outlandish costume you've got on," the doctor said, as her patient finally began responding – coming back into the real world.

"This? Oh, I didn't take time to change. I was more concerned with getting help here and getting things done. Muriel changed, but that's mostly because she was wearing a dress, and was flying. NOT a good combination for a woman," Taylor said, grinning.

"And is there a reason why there appears to be a snake on your hat?" the doctor asked.

Taylor snatched the hat off his head, and threw it on the ground in shock. "MURIEL!!!"

"Relax. It's fake. You needed a hat band, and I thought of Arizona's most famous wildlife. It's a diamondback rattlesnake. Fake. But I left the head and rattles in the front to add to the effect," Muriel said. "I can change it," she added, and did – to a flat braided leather band, with the ends crossed in front and 'captured' by silver knobs. "There, silly. Nothing to be afraid of, now."

"Muriel," Taylor growled.

"Oh, dear, relax. It was fake, and couldn't have hurt anyone. But it was impressive. And if you were going to be a cowboy, you needed something to jazz up the outfit a bit," Muriel said, switching back to her red dress.

"Mmm. I can see why you wouldn't have wanted to fly over a crowd wearing that," the doctor said, smiling. "You'd have caused more accidents. I think we're done here. Let's get him over to the side, out of the way."

"Muriel," Mata said, coming up to her, "ready to put the bus back upright?"

"Um . . . I think we have room. Yea, the last of the patients are being moved to the side. By the way, how's the driver?" asked Muriel.

"Still a bit shocky," Mata said. "Someone's working with him. OK, people," she said to the Envoys, "three on this side, too, and let's make this delicate." And the bus finished righting itself. Then dents and scrapes on the side were repaired, glass replaced in the windows, tires and lights checked, and the door opened. Nobody made a move to re-board it.

"How many are there," asked Taylor.

"About fifty," Mata said. "Why?"

"I was thinking that their day had been radically disturbed. They need something to take their mind off it," Taylor said. "How about we take them to my back yard, and have a picnic. Just let me thank the Regiment's doctors for coming out so quickly." And left to do so.

"And I'll thank that nice officer for helping, and getting other officers to do crowd control," Muriel said. And went off in another direction.

Chapter 34

Picnic in the Park
(Thursday afternoon)

"Hi. I don't know if you remember me," Muriel said.

"Miss, I don't think I could forget you. Ever," the Met officer said. "You were there asking me about what was happening, and suddenly everything WAS happening. You weren't involved, were you?"

"Only after the fact. Taylor and I mobilized forces to deal with the accident," Muriel said.

"Taylor and . . . miss, who are you?" he asked.

"Oh, sorry," she said, and pulled a green passport out of a 'no pocket' and handed it to him.

"MY WORD!" he said, opening it up and seeing her certificate indicating that she was an Ambassador. "You're HER?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then the one you called Taylor . . . ?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry. His Majesty, King Taylor," Muriel said. "You did good, by the way. It really helped having other officers in to control the crowd."

"It took me a minute," he confessed. "I really didn't know where to start, at first."

"Well, you did the right thing," Commissioner Smythe said, coming up behind Muriel. "You called for reinforcements and got out of the way, and let these people get on with it."

"SIR!"

"Relax, officer," Smythe said. "I'm not disciplining you. First time at something like this, is it?"

"Yes, sir. Always been rather peaceful if hectic, here, this time of day, sir," the officer said, nervously.

"Well, things do happen. And you handled yourself well," Smythe said. "I'll have someone else cover the patrol for you, today. I think you need some time to recover from the excitement. Muriel, thank you for helping out. Fastest I've ever seen an accident scene cleared."

"Taylor helped, sir," Muriel said, smiling.

"Nonetheless, I think some sort of certificate or award should be forthcoming for your quick action," Smythe said. "I'll see to it as soon as I'm back in my office." And Smythe turned and translated out.

"Well, officer, since you're no longer on duty, Taylor has suggested a picnic to help calm down these poor people. Would you care to join us?" asked Muriel.

"Yes, please," Taylor said, coming up behind her. "The least we could do to show our thanks for helping out."

"YOUR MAJESTY!" the officer said, saluting.

"Relax, officer," Taylor said. "I'm just a guy doing a job. Just like you did. Come along, now. You wouldn't want to miss the picnic." And Taylor walked him back to the victims of the accident, then translated everybody to the park behind the Palace.

Envoys and Regimental guard had set up tables and started a barbecue. Various types of picnic style salads and drinks graced the tables, including soft drinks and milk. There were also potato chips, as well as the thicker pieces like over-sized French fries that the British called 'chips'. And Envoys were going around finding out what people wanted. Chicken, hamburgers, hot dogs, and even pork and beef ribs were available, along with a great deal of laughing and kidding.

Muriel switched back to her uniform, and walked around greeting her guests, starting at one end of the tables. Taylor did the same, starting at the other. Both jollying them along and helping them to relax and feel special. In this setting, so obviously on the Palace grounds, it was obvious who they were, but the crowd seemed to take it well and were smiling and grinning at the funning the two performed.

As they neared each other, Muriel heard one child say, "How come there's a snake on your hat?"

"Oh, that was Muriel's idea," Taylor said. "She thought if I was going to be a cowboy, that I should have something as a hat band that showed how outrageous I was. At first, it scared me and made me feel all over funny. But she said that it was a fake and couldn't hurt anyone. So I put it back on."

"That's cool!" the kid said. "I wish I had a hat like that. What kind of snake is it?"

"It's a diamondback rattlesnake," Muriel said, "and it's fake. Diamondbacks come from where I used to live, in Arizona in America," she added, creating a hat on the spot, and putting it on his head. Taylor isn't too fond of snakes, and that's why it made him feel funny to wear on on his head. But he overcame his feeling scared, and put it back on. What does that tell you?"

"That sometimes people have to get over being scared," the boy said. "You're her, aren't you. The one in the set I've got that has twelve others along with you."

"Ah. You've got a set of 'Ambassadors All'. Yes. I'm Muriel. And yes, the rest of my friends actually exist. Some of them live here in London, now, and the rest are still in the American Enclave."

"Do you miss them? The ones still in America?" the boy asked.

"Oh, they visit me, sometimes, and I visit them, sometimes," Muriel said. "When it doesn't take any time to travel anywhere in the world, then you get to visit far away friends more often."

"I've got a teacher that sometimes shows us things out of history. They look real, but small, and they show us what it was like for people at various times. She said that they're made by somebody in the American Enclave," he said.

"Yep. That would be my friend Don. He's a trainer, troublemaker, and bat-boy," Muriel said. "And he's one of the twelve friends that were the first that I trained. He didn't used to like history, and now he's a history professor, and goes around to schools around where he lives, showing kids what it was really like to be in those times."

"How come he's a troublemaker and bat-boy?" the boy asked.

"Chuckie, you shouldn't bother the lady with so many questions!" his mother said.

"Oh, but he should," Muriel responded. "It's how kids learn. Troublemaker is because he used to pull practical jokes on the rest of us all the time. And bat-boy is because he ended up being the one to test shields on newly trained people."

"Chuckie, huh," said a familiar voice in a gray uniform. "You should become a plumber and learn to cook. Then people could tease you about calling you Upchuck." And the boy giggle-laughed.

"That's silly. That's a kid type joke!" he said.

"Well, that's because a kid came up with it," Chuck said. "Muriel was twelve when I first met her. I did the plumbing in her office and apartment, then went on to learn how to make meals for her. That's when she started teasing me. And you know what it is that kids do," he added.

And from the air around him came the chorus, "KIDS KID!" which set the boy off, again.

"You're different," the boy said, looking at Chuck, then at the other people around him. "Something like her," he added, pointing to Muriel, "but brighter. I'm not supposed to know that, yet, am I?"

"Well, it means that you're getting in touch with your soul, and learning more about some of the things that we do," Muriel said. "You'll learn even more as you get older. And, if you are ever confused about what's happening, then come to my office and we'll help you understand it. Mata, did we ever get an image of the front of my office?"

"Yep," Mata said. "Here you go, sir. That's Muriel behind the glass, at the desk on the left, and me at the desk on the right. Just think hard about that, and we'll know and come get you."

"Oh, wow! Really?" he asked.

"Yep," Mata replied. "Then you can find out how Muriel can not only believe six impossible things before breakfast, but DO them." And the boy giggled.

"Alice In Wonderland," he said. "Does she really do that?"

"Sometimes," Muriel said. "Things come up. Emergencies happen. And lots of people think that what I do is fake. But it really isn't. It just seems that way because they don't understand what I do, or how. And now, I'd better get on greeting some other people, before they feel left out," she grinned at him. And as she went to the next person, she saw Chuckie take off his hat, and turn it around and look at it. The wonder in his eyes kept her going through the rest of the people.

Finally, it was over, and the people were translated home. Envoys cleared away the remains of a fun meal, and Regimental guards went back to their barracks. And Taylor and Muriel collapsed in her office.

"Did you actually get something to eat?" asked Taylor.

"Yea. You?"

"Finally, near the end of it," Taylor said. "But it was fun. You had quite a discussion with that one boy."

"He's about to connect," Muriel said. "His mother isn't trained. I've got an Envoy from Home watching him. When he connects, I'll know and bring him and his mother in. He can't be much more than nine years old."

"How do you figure?" asked Taylor.

"Because it was nine years ago that the Envoys of Home changed the way they inserted souls in bodies, and programmed them to open up over time," Muriel said. "He's a bit advanced, which is actually normal. It's not geared to age, but to mental development. And he's already got some power – enough to drive a personal shield, anyway."

"So, he's the first of the new method?" asked Taylor.

"I don't know that he's the first. Maybe. But it's definitely started to happen. And we'll see more of this, now," Muriel replied.

"Muriel, you might want to see this," Mata said, and put it on her big screen.

"This is what happened, as viewed by our news helicopter, earlier today. I repeat, this was earlier today, not live," a newscaster said.

It's beautiful up here, today. And as you can see the tourists are out in full force . . . WAIT! WHAT WAS THAT! Turn back . . . OK hold it there. OH, MY GOSH! A bus has flipped on it's side. And there's a woman FLYING to the scene. OH! She's wearing gray, and is followed by another one, plus a man in some sort of cowboy outfit. The first woman seems to be giving the second directions, and . . . WOW! Did you see that? About fifty Envoys just showed up. That first one must be Ambassador Muriel, then. We'll see if we can get the names of the other two. And one of our Metropolitan police has just reached the scene, and WHAT IS THIS! Met police just appeared on the scene. About fifty of them, and they're clearing back the traffic and holding the crowd back.

OH! Envoys are getting passengers out of the bus by drawing them up through the windows. And there's members of the Regiment of Home, going to them and getting them off the street and into chairs. Some of them look a bit bloody, like they'd been banged around a bit. Envoys are bringing more out, now, and laying them on pads in the street. THAT'S why they wanted the street cleared. Some civilians just popped in out of nowhere and are going to the victims. WAIT A MINUTE! WHAT IS THIS? I'm seeing victims come out of the bus bloody, and now there's no blood, and the victims are walking to the side where there are more chairs. Now more victims are being brought out. That first woman, Ambassador Muriel, seems to be attending one. The cowboy is at another. Now, a civilian has come over to the Ambassador, and is talking with her. There, the cowboy has looked up and . . . Davey, boy, you AREN'T going to believe this. I think that's His Majesty down there. What would he be doing there? Oh? You think . . . Well, that is a possibility. Folks, the station says that since His Majesty and the Ambassador are consorts, there's no reason why they shouldn't be out together.

OK, now three Envoys and three civilians have gone into the bus and it's being tilted up. OH, OH, MY GOSH! Three more people are being brought out, and it looks like the injuries are serious. But there aren't any ambulances. They're down on the pads, and civilians are going to them, along with the civilians that were already with them. It looks like the victims arms are crushed.

Davey, you AREN'T going to believe this. I wouldn't if I weren't watching it. Davey, their arms are being repaired. Blood is being removed from the surface of their arms and clothing. One of the civilians . . . what's that? They're WHAT? They're doctors! But they don't have . . . Envoy medicine? I didn't know that they got sick. They don't? OH! Envoy techniques used in medicine. So they're trained doctors? University of Home? Licensed? Oh, WOW! How come we've never heard of them? But yes, now they're being taken to the sideline, and the bus is being set up on it's wheels. I must say, this is the most remarkable

thing that I've ever reported.

And now the Ambassador is going around thanking people for helping. And there's Commissioner Smythe, talking with the first officer on the scene. The only reason I know it's the Ambassador is because I was watching her. She changed from the gray uniform to a red dress. Commissioner Smythe just left, and there go His Majesty, the Ambassador, the police officer and the mystery woman. Envoys are going to the victims in the chairs, now, and they're disappearing. They call it what? Translating? You mean like from one language to another? OH! It's a term used in image manipulation and drafting programs for moving. You think they're what? I didn't know that! One of the men at the station says that he has had Envoy training. Translating means that they're moving from one place to another, like you see on some of the science fiction programs. But that they really do it. I wonder where they're taking them. And traffic is being allowed to flow, now. I guess that's it for this.

“And that's what happened, just before noon. Again, this was a rebroadcast. Recently, in an interview with a member of the medical licensing board, we heard that the Ambassador was using some sort of fake tricks to pretend that she'd healed her hand of a knife cut. Obviously, the member of the licensing board was mistaken. You've seen people very neatly and quickly healed of injuries much worse than what the board member suggested. And these were not tricks. We've had reports from the police, the Regiment of Home, and some of the victims, themselves – sworn affidavits, mind you – that the events actually took place and were not staged. I think the licensing board may want to retract their statement, now. And I, for one, want to know why we aren't seeing these civilian doctors in hospitals or even in private practice.”

Mata clicked the screen off. “I think it's safe to say that the medical licensing board and the insurance companies will shortly revise their thinking.” And Muriel just laughed.

Chapter 35

Back Pedaling

(Friday morning)

"I'd like you to stay around, this morning, if you don't mind, Muriel," Taylor said, as they finished breakfast. "I've ordered the representatives of the insurance companies and the medical licensing board to meet me in the Blue drawing room, again. I think they've been given sufficient evidence that Envoy techniques work, now."

"Gladly. Though I'll admit that it's faster than I thought it would be," she said.

"That's only because I ORDERED them in. And I'm sending Envoys to be sure that they show up. This nonsense stops, now," he replied. "They should be assembling, now. No, no. Finish your breakfast. They can wait. After all, I AM the King."

"Yes, and it's GOOD to be the King, isn't it," Muriel quipped.

"Well, it IS nice that I can tell SOMEONE what to do," he quipped back.

"Aw. Poor boy. Nobody loves him," Muriel said.

"Oh, I don't know. I think you did a pretty good job last night," he replied. "More? No? Then I guess we should go," he added, and they translated to seats in the drawing room.

Taylor seated Muriel, then took the other chair. "Well," he said. "Here we are, again. I trust you have all seen the events of yesterday? I think that pretty much refutes your comments to the media. If not, then come up here, and we'll give you an up close and personal demonstration. Only this time, we'll use YOUR hand. Muriel spared you that, the other day. But, it's always been an option. I expect a public apology for the statements you made in your interview, and that you will now accept that the license granted by the Medical Board of Home is valid. And I expect that you insurance companies will now modify your plans to include Envoy trained doctors. And I expect that this will all be done by eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Do I make myself clear?"

There was some muttering from the group. "I said, DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR!"

"Your majesty," one participant said, standing up, "I, for one, have seen no proof that people were healed by these untested and probably fake methods."

"AH!" Taylor said. "A volunteer." And he grabbed him in a shield and brought him up before the assembled mass. "Muriel," he said, turning the man to face the group, "may I borrow your knife?"

"Of course," she said, drawing it from a 'no pocket' and handing it to him, handle first. "Be careful. It's razor sharp. It won't take much to draw blood." By this time, the man was

visibly shaking and sweating.

"Now, hold still now," Taylor said, unnecessarily as he grabbed the man's hand with a shield and held it up where everybody could see. He drew the knife across the man's palm, cutting to the bone, and the man screamed. "Oh, now that didn't hurt. After all, it was fake. That's what you said, wasn't it?" he asked, then proceeded to heal the wound. When he was done, even the blood that had run down his sleeve and dribbled onto the floor were gone. "Now, tell me. Was THAT fake?" he asked.

"Sir."

"I asked a question, and I demand an answer. NOW! Or shall we try it again?"

"No, sir. I mean, no, it was not fake," the man said.

"Good. Go sit down," Taylor said. "Now, is there anyone else that needs more encouragement in understanding that I DO tell the truth, and so does my consort. She's a gentle person, and didn't want to hurt anyone. But I . . . I am a military man, and believe that some hurts can save there being a lot more in the future and for a greater number of people. So, don't be afraid. Step right up and I'll be happy to demonstrate that this IS real. It's as real as it gets, people."

"I'll see that you're arrested for assault, King or no," another one said.

"Really? Where's the evidence of assault? Who will believe your wild tale?" asked Taylor. "Claim assault, and that's what I'll ask in court. If you admit that I cut him, you'll have to admit that I healed him, too. If the one happened, then the other happened. You know, there used to be legends of Kings being able to heal with a touch. You've just seen it happen. And . . . I've got a record of the events, and it WILL be shown in open court. You will look utterly ridiculous. Oh, and your company will be taken over by Home, with my permission. And the licensing board will be dissolved. You have waisted the people's time and resources feeding your greed. And it stops, NOW, or I'll take actions that will make a minor cut that was healed look like a Sunday School picnic. I am that disgusted with you that I'm tempted to simply have you all arrested on charges of fraud, conspiracy to commit fraud, and extortion of the people of Britain. Instead, I'm giving you a chance. The last chance that you'll ever get. This is the end of your scam." A shocked silence met his statement.

"You can't be serious!" somebody finally said.

"Really? Would you like to see how serious I am?" Taylor asked. "I have complete records of your organizations. Financial, letters, emails, transcripts of phone calls, everything. I can prove collusion between you all. And my lawyers are ready to file criminal charges against you. So, I think you'd better get your heads out of your greed and start thinking of your lives. You could be spending the rest of them in jail. And not one of the fancy country-club ones that you hear about. Maximum security. I'll take that a step further. For every time a patient died in the past five years that could have been healed by an Envoy doctor, charges of negligent homicide will be placed against you. You'll never taste free air

again.”

“Taylor,” Muriel suddenly said, “why are you even offering them the opportunity. Home is ready to take the insurance companies. Just word of the evidence you have against them will drop their stock to pennies. We freeze their accounts, and take over, and start legal action to recover what they've managed to squirrel away, sell their houses and cars, jewels, stocks and bonds, and anything else that they own that can bring in money to pay back the clients that they've wronged. It'll take about ten minutes to start the ball rolling, and by Monday morning they'll be on the street. Just like many of their clients who were sued out of everything they owned to try to pay off medical bills.”

“Muriel, I just said that you were gentle. You're talking about throwing these people out on the street without any chance of redeeming themselves,” Taylor said. “That's more ruthless than what I offered them. At least in prison they'd be fed and taken care of. Be warm in the winter, not freezing to death under a piece of cardboard.”

“Yep,” she replied. “YOU said I was gentle. I didn't. We could just take them to Home, you know. Of course, we'd bring their bodies back for their next of kin to bury. They'd never survive the Judgment.”

“You're talking about killing us!” one said.

“Nope. We wouldn't have to. The Judgment would hit you. You judging yourself, without excuses, without rationalizations. The realization of what you'd done would so shame your soul that it would suicide. I've seen it. NOT pretty,” Muriel said.

“But . . . you're giving us no choice at all! You're coercing us to do what you want,” the man said. “NO court would accept that as a valid contract.”

“We're not talking about a contract, here. We're talking about the law. And we've given you a choice. The choice you have between living or dying because of your own decisions. No jury in the world would convict either one of us if Taylor took action against you and you ended up on the streets, dying from the cold in the winter,” Muriel said. “And, by the same token, no jury would convict us for showing you that Home DOES exist, and the People of Home – the ones called Envoys – have the abilities that we say they have. And that we, also, have those capabilities. It's just unfortunate that you wouldn't survive the experience.”

“How do you know? How CAN you know?” the man asked.

“I've been to Home. And I've had the Judgment. In fact, I go through it every time I go to Home,” Muriel said. “The first time was when I was Twelve. And I don't even know how many times I've been back. I have friends there.”

“What? Envoys?”

“Nope. Human friends. People of earth that have died,” Muriel said. “Think about it, people. THAT'S what you face. Taylor, I'm going to apologize to you in advance. I may mess

up the room a bit. I promise I'll clean up after myself," she said, and stood up. And grew. And glowed. But it was when the wings appeared that there was a gasp from the crowd. "Didn't expect that, did you," her voice boomed through the room. "Yes. I am a Citizen of Home – a Child of Home. And you are lost souls that will eventually go to your doom." The wings disappeared, the glow disappeared, and she resumed her normal height and sat down.

"Are you"

"Am I what? Am I alive? Of course. I'm human. I have a mother and father. I even have a last name," Muriel said. "I don't use it professionally, but I do have one. It's even on my passport from Home. And no, my reason isn't because I'm angry with my parents, or anything like that. In fact, they visited me, just recently. And I'm always going to their home for one reason or another. Sometimes just for coffee and talk. Sometimes for dinner – well, lunch for them. I have a great deal of respect for them, as well as love. They're more than parents, they're friends."

"B-B-But the"

"The wings? Any Envoy and anyone with Envoy training can do that. Records of me doing it go all the way back to when I was twelve. OH! You thought all this time that it was some sort of special effects? Nope. They're real. Now, I CAN do illusions. But even the illusions are real. They're not a change to my own body, but they look and feel solid, and behave as solids. And then there are things that I make," and she produced a cup of coffee, and drank from it. "Now, THAT'S real. Real cup. Real coffee, fixed just the way I like it. You're sitting in chairs that, before the meeting, didn't exist. They're solid, they're real, and when the meeting is over, they'll be returned to energy."

"But that's against the laws of nature!" another man said.

"Nope. Just not part of your knowledge," Muriel said. "If I thought you could survive the Judgment, I'd even be happy to train you and you'd see for yourself that it's all real. And then you'd be faced with the the problem of nobody believing YOU."

"Now, I think you've taken enough of our time. Are there any other questions? Anyone else that needs a demonstration that this is all real?" Taylor asked. At the unchoreographed head shakes, 'no', he said, "Very well, you will be transported back to your offices. And I expect the retraction of the statements in your interview, and the changes in your policy publicly made by eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Mind you, no late night hiding. This should be where the people of Britain can see it, and know that changes have been made. Good morning to you." And they were ushered out by Envoys that translated them to their offices.

Taylor and Muriel didn't wait for them to leave. They translated directly to their recliners in her office. Muriel still had her cup. Taylor made one for himself, but with tea.

"Muriel, were you serious about taking them to Home? Wouldn't that count against you?" asked Taylor, quietly.

"Maybe. It's possible that they would die there. But it's also possible that they wouldn't. That bunch of religious bigots and business scum that I took when I was twelve survived it. I don't know how, but I'd suspect that, because they were still alive, that the soul thought there might be a chance of them redeeming themselves. So, it's possible that the same thing could happen to this crop. But I doubt it, because they DID cause deaths by not letting Envoy trained human doctors practice medicine. And because they DID deny claims that cost their clients everything they had, and some of THEM died on the streets. But because the actions were theirs, and there was the chance that they'd survive, I doubt that it would count against me."

"That sounds like rationalization," he said.

"Irrelevant. I didn't do it, and didn't intend to. I simply wanted them to know what would happen in their future," she said. "Taylor, they blew it. They had a chance in life, and decided that they'd rather screw their clients than behave honorably. Their own choices in life are what would keep it from counting against me. I know. I've been back to Home more often than you have. And at least one of those times, the person I took with me died. It did NOT count against me. Ask Marcia. She was with me. That was the guy that was high in that fake religious community. They'd kidnapped a woman, stole her identity and maxed out her credit cards, and 'married' her to the dude. She was under guard and couldn't escape for a long time. Long enough for him to rape her, repeatedly, and get her pregnant. You know where she is, now? In Carla's office. Her AND her daughter. Both trained, and safe at last. Marcia and I caught him and took him to Home. His soul suicided. We took the body back to the site of the religious community – it had been evacuated by Marcia and her troupes at the request of the FBI – then left a note with the local police to let them know that any further 'relaxation' of the laws would result in their being investigated. And to go pick up the body and dispose of it."

"You knew he'd suicide?"

"Yep. Marcia and I both. I went back shortly after – I can't remember what for, now – but the Judgment never called me on it," Muriel said. "Remember the balance? IT told me that I wouldn't be called on it. Same today. They have destroyed lives. Actually as well as financially. It wouldn't have twinged. It was the only reason that I could use it as a threat. Remember? I'm always checking. Making sure that what I do is within the balance. I've crossed the line a couple of times, where I felt it was worth it to do so. And the Judgment caught me out on them. But subsequent actions washed those couple of times out."

"I've got to think about this," he said. "It goes against everything that I've been taught."

"Ah. Yes. I know what you've been taught. Tell me, is it right – is it JUST – that you can be punished for everything that you do that's bad, but won't be rewarded for what you do that is good?" she asked. "The balance is just. It's harsh, but just. It's what being fair is REALLY all about. You are your own judge. And what you do is reflected in the balance both ways."

"So, that's it. I never really understood why the balance could help me," he said, in

reflection. "But now, it makes sense. I can't be bad all my life, and do one good thing and wipe it all out. I have to try to make some sort of restitution where I've done something wrong. But even things that might be counted as wrong by humans might not cause the balance to dip, because what I'm doing is being done for others."

"Tell me, did you check your balance before you cut that guy's hand?"

"Yea. YES, I DID! Rather habitually, but I looked. And it actually pushed it more toward the white. I didn't really pay attention. But I just checked. It IS further toward the white," he said.

"So, now you know. It was a harsh action, taken in an even harsher way. But the results were actually good, even though the action, itself, would seem to count against you," Muriel said. "No, it's not 'the ends justify the means', nor even a case of 'for the greater good'. Though it's closer to the latter. Even if it fails, the fact that you gave them a choice, and showed them that it actually works, it was because of the choice that it went toward the white. You were trying to save the lives and health, and finances of the people of Britain. You were acting as a King to protect those that looked to you for protection."

"Just as a cop or a soldier may have to shoot someone, to protect the people he's sworn to serve. Yes. NOW I think I understand. Thanks," he said.

She smiled. "No thanks necessary. I didn't explain it properly, before. I should have. I'm sorry that you were puzzled and confused. Please," she said, "ANY time you don't understand something, ask. I'll do my best to help you understand. And if I can't do it, I'll holler for help. This is important. To you. To me. To everyone."

"Do you think it will work?" he asked.

She sighed. "No. I think they'll try to convince themselves that it was all some sort of mass hypnosis, or something. I think that Saturday morning we'll have to release enough to the media to show that they're dirty. You know, 'the King and the Ambassador from Home have investigated the medical insurance companies and the medical licensing board and found that . . .', and name the companies. And I'll let Ted know that it's going down. Monday morning, when the stock market opens, their stock will go through the floor. And we'll pick it all up. Then you can act on the medical licensing board. It's the law. It was passed BEFORE you were named King. It just wasn't enforced. So, you dissolve the board, and put in new people. People that have been trained in BOTH versions of medicine. And you make it plain what the standards are, and what the penalties are for NOT seeing to it that patients are cured."

"OK, you've thought further ahead on this than I have. You may have to coach me, some."

"That can be done," Muriel said, with a smile.

Chapter 36

Declaration (Friday afternoon)

"I'm going to be busy for a bit. Oh, nothing serious. Just that I think I should have my talking points together," Taylor said. "Will that disturb you?"

"Nope. I've got a couple of things to go over, myself. Oh, can I drop a little suggestion on you? Arrest them. If they do what I think they're going to do, arrest them for breaking the law," Muriel said.

"I see you have as much faith in the insurance companies and medical licensing board as I do," Taylor said, grinning. "Faith that they'll try again to convince the world that Envoy medical techniques are a fraud. OK, that's on the books. But how will that help?"

"Oh, the thing I'll be working on is to pull a mass seizure of their records. It's what's done in an arrest. I'll also suggest that you get the warrants in advance, based on probable cause, while I see about setting it up with the media that if they request an interview, we be notified so we can be there," Muriel said.

"Hmm. Have Janice do that. NOT you. Oh, you'll be along with me should it come to using the warrants, as I believe will be necessary. But you shouldn't be the one to make the request of the media," Taylor said. "Let it be my office."

Muriel smiled. "Done," she said. "I'll get right on it." And Muriel translated out to Janice's desk in Taylor's office.

"Do you know, that even though I know how to do that, it STILL startles me?" Janice said, grinning.

"Would you like me to knock, first?" Muriel grinned back. "Seriously, you know that we just had a meeting with the insurance companies and the medical licensing board. We also had one a couple of days ago. We suggested, very strongly, that they allow doctors in Envoy medical techniques to practice, and that it be covered by insurance. We believe that they will decide to hold another interview or make some sort of statement to the media that what those doctors do is all a fraud."

"And you want me to contact the media and have Taylor notified if they try to set something like that up. Right?" asked Janice.

"Yep. He'd like to be there when they make their statement," Muriel said. "Oh, he'll be along, shortly. He has some things to put in action, or he'd have told you, himself."

"Got it. You're not to be mentioned," Janice said.

"You're getting pretty good at this," Muriel said, and the grin, if possible, got even bigger.

"That's my job," she replied. "Besides, you've got to remember that the British are more used to having to think between the lines. It's actually more difficult thinking both the British and American way of directness. But I manage. I'll get right on it. Anyone in particular that I should call?" And Muriel pulled out a list of names, numbers, and what organization they were with. "No problem. Maybe fifteen minutes, and it'll be in place."

"Thanks, Janice. Now, I've got my own work to do," Muriel said, and translated out.

And in her office, Mata said, "I've alerted Ted, and got about two hundred Envoys to lock them down. I've also alerted Marcia, and she's got her crew up to date on the proceedings. And I contacted Ralph's security chief and requested that he be in on it. Home badges instead of Crown Special Investigator?"

"Hmm, now that's a good question," Muriel said. "Technically, this is Taylor that's taking the action. No, I think we should use the Crown Special Investigator badges."

"OK, I'll let Marcia know," Mata said. "And all four of your squads know. You might want to contact Commissioner Smythe, though."

"Next on my agenda," Muriel said. "I wouldn't leave him out of this. Did Marcia ever get the authority to arrest in Britain?"

"She did. After what she and you did with Rob, Smythe about broke his fingers typing up the authorization and signing it. ALL her troops have it," Mata said. "So do you, by the way."

"Oh, REALLY!"

"Yea, Taylor forced that through when you were named as Special Investigator," Mata said. "I thought you realized that."

"Well, if I was told, I'd forgotten. OK, even so, we do this the way the FBI set up. We lock down the evidence, and it's a Met officer that retrieves it and follows their procedures for evidence collection. In this case, we do it like we would a company. We're taking out the decision makers. The rest go home on two week paid vacation while the transfer is made. Our people – Envoys – in as security, and NOBODY but someone authorized by Ted or myself get in."

"I'd like to amend that," Colonel Jackie said, from behind her.

"Jackie! What's up?" asked Muriel.

"I'm being under-worked. I'm the Ambassador to Britain. Shouldn't I be in on this, too?" she asked.

"I thought you had your hands full with the Regiment," Muriel said. "I don't believe in overloading people."

"The Regiment is doing fine. In fact, we'll be happy to assist your little effort," the Colonel said. "Taylor tattled," she added, grinning.

"I hardly think it was tattling. And you're welcome to help. How much did you hear?" asked Muriel.

"Enough. We go in and locate evidence without touching it. Lock it and the personnel down, and wait for the Met to do their thing. Will they work with us, so we can see the evidence as they bag it?"

"Leave that to Envoys. No offense, but they'll make a true copy of it for the records," Muriel said. "Ted will need them for Triple E, even though it would actually be run out of your Enclave. Any new company or organization we take over is run through the main office, first. Mostly, that's because they have the experience with going through the records and finding the trash. Likewise, because the lawyers there have an idea of what's what."

"Not British law. Yes, let them go through them for financial and other chicanery. But leave the law to our law office," Jackie said.

"Done," Muriel said. "And you're right. OK, we'll get this sorted out."

"It's on," Taylor said. "Oh, hi, Jackie," he added, off-hand. Then, back to Muriel, "Janice got with the media. Good thing she did. They already made the request to make their statement, and it's set for about an hour from now."

"We'll be ready. I just relayed it to my commanders," Jackie said.

"And I've just told Marcia and Ralph's security chief," Mata said. "Oops. I think I'm about to get told off."

"Mata," Ralph said. "I'm not going to call you out on this, but you CAN contact me directly. I appreciate what you're doing, and that you might not be sure of procedure with regard to me, and that's why I thought I'd straighten it out. If I have questions, I can always contact Muriel. But you pretty much act for her, anyway. Even if it's just in advance."

"Well, that's the gentlest 'talking to' that I've had in a while. Ralph, it was more a case of my not knowing how YOU'D feel about it, and I was going to talk to you after this was over," Mata said. "So, you beat me. I have no problem talking to you. And now I know that you have no problem talking to me. So, it's straight."

"Heads up, people," Marcia translated in and hollered. "It's on. Someone on one of the media staff leaked Taylor's request back to the insurance companies, and they moved it up. They're going on the air in ten minutes." Then she blinked back out.

"Taylor," Muriel said and sent.

"It's OK. We're ready," he said, translating in. "Marcia alerted Janice, too. I've GOT to talk to that young lady. For this, she could have come directly to me."

"Never mind. Let's just get there. Do you know where it's being done?" asked Muriel.

"Yep. Smythe is coming, too. In fact, he'll be the one doing the arrests," Taylor said. "He 'offered', and I thought it would look better that way. Let's go." And they translated out.

As they translated in to the auditorium of one of the insurance companies, one of the Chief Executive Officers was speaking. "We, the assembled insurance companies and the head of the Medical Licensing Board, would like to set the record straight. The methods and procedures of those supposedly trained to provide medical care using Envoy techniques have not been fully investigated, and therefore are not licensed by Britain to be used in this country. In fact, there is sufficient evidence that they are frauds, and should be avoided at all costs. Actions are being initiated to have such practitioners arrested should they attempt to use such procedures in violation of the law" And that's as far as he got.

"I have a warrant for your arrest," boomed out Commissioner Smythe's voice. "You are in violation of a standing order enacted by Parliament at the request of the Queen, five years ago. Your companies are shut down. The licensing board is shut down. Both are now under investigation by the Crown for subversive activity and financial irregularities. I will ask you to come quietly, but whether or not it's quietly, you WILL come with us." And Met police officers translated in and began cuffing the participants. When they were finally all translated out, Taylor translated to the same place the CEO had been speaking from.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Five years ago my grandmother, the Queen, researched the practices of persons trained in the medical procedures taught by Envoys and Envoy trained people. The results of those investigations were that the procedures were effective in all cases. This research included records from various countries that had already approved Envoy trained doctors to practice. The Queen then passed the results to Parliament, and they enacted a law that stated that such procedures were approved for use in Britain. This information was passed to the licensing board and to the insurance companies," he said.

"Five years have passed," he continued. "In that five years, the Crown has received various excuses for NOT complying with this law. We were told by the insurance companies that they hadn't had time to put the proper mechanisms in order. We were told by the licensing board that they hadn't gone through all the records and research in the investigation to be sure that such procedures were valid. In short, they were violating the law because it would have cost them money. The insurance companies were controlling the licensing board in this matter, to the detriment of the people of Britain."

"I have had direct experience with the procedures, as Colonel in Chief of the Regiment of Home, prior to my assumption of the position of monarch. I have had the opportunity to view and understand the investigation that my predecessor, the Queen, had undertaken. I

have had the opportunity to view, first hand, the results of medical procedures conducted by Envoy trained doctors. And, I have come to understand that the excuses used by the insurance companies and the licensing board were just that. Excuses. They had no intention of complying with the law," he said.

"And it was for this reason that I confronted them with the fact that they were violating the law of the land. They responded with an attempted smear campaign. Shortly after trying to say that the procedures were a fake and fraudulent, there was an accident involving a bus in one of the tourist areas of London. I'm sure you have seen or at least heard about it. Victims of that accident were healed and able to walk away under their own power because of the techniques devised by the Envoys and passed on to citizens of this and other countries. People, you've seen with your own eyes that these procedures work. There is no excuse for the insurance companies and licensing board to have withheld the opportunity for ALL British citizens to benefit from them. They have violated the law, and the Crown hereby removes their authorization to function in this country," he concluded.

Muriel then replaced Taylor, and took off her hat. "Ladies and gentlemen," her soft, gentle voice reached the microphones with no trouble, "My name is Muriel. I'm the Leader of Home, and the Ambassador to earth. Home feels strongly that you have been ill used in this matter, and should not have to suffer because of the illegal activities of the companies and licensing board. For this reason, all current and forthcoming requests for insurance payment for medical procedures will be routed to representatives of Home, and paid. Right now, elements of Home and the Metropolitan Police are seizing the records of the companies and the licensing board, in part to further the investigation into the illegal activities, and in part so that all persons with an account with one of the companies will be duly covered should they seek an Envoy trained doctor for medical attention. In short, people, you're covered. The current contracts you have with the companies will be examined for all those areas that the companies used to deny claims. Those will be eliminated. We, the People of Home, and Citizens of Home, care about you. We care about your health and well being. And we take this action at the request of your Monarch, King Taylor, so that you need not be hurt by the criminal activities of a few greedy people. This is an authorized action under the treaty that Britain has with Home, and at the formal request of your King. And we are pleased to assist him in this action." And she stepped back.

The red light went out on the camera, and the reporter said, "That's it. It's back to the station. You may get calls for further information, but I think you rather well covered it, here. Thank you for this. The station is sending the entire video to the other networks all over Britain, so you can be sure that this will go out, straight away." And Muriel and Taylor translated back to her office.

"Whoosh. Well, I guess that nailed that down," Muriel said.

"Can Home handle the costs of this?" asked Taylor.

"Oh, they'll find a way. Leave that up to Ted and Triple E. They know what they're doing," Muriel said. "They've done stuff like this enough times in the past that I stopped trying to stick my nose into it. Besides, we froze all their accounts, including those hidden accounts

so they wouldn't have to pay taxes on their profits. Where do you THINK those outrageous bonuses came from?"

"You know? I never thought about it," Taylor said.

"That's because you're a more direct person," Muriel said. "I think it's partly because of your military background. You tend to think in a straight line. But people like that tend to think as twisty as a snake in a pretzel factory." And Taylor busted up, laughing. "Can you just see that poor snake, ducking and dodging, twisting every which way to keep from becoming half-baked?" And that did it. Poor Taylor had to sit down and TRY to control his laughter.

Chapter 37

Charging In (Monday morning)

"The charges, as set forth by the Crown prosecution, are as follows. Willful violation of laws enacted by Parliament regarding the licensing of doctors trained in Envoy techniques. Willful violation of laws enacted by Parliament concerning payment of insurance claims of doctors trained in Envoy techniques. Willful denial of claims for Envoy style medical treatment of patients covered under contracts with insurance companies. Conspiracy between insurance companies to deny claims presented by doctors trained in Envoy techniques. Fraudulent reporting by the insurance companies of claims presented by doctors trained in Envoy techniques. Conspiracy with hospitals to deny claims presented by doctors trained in Envoy techniques. Negligent homicide, cumulatively two hundred and fifty-three counts, for patient deaths as a result of denial of authorization of payment to doctors trained in Envoy techniques. Willful financial ruin of persons who were denied medical treatment by doctors trained in Envoy techniques, forcing them to use expensive conventional methods. Conspiracy to avoid paying taxes on funds received under contracts with customers of the insurance companies. Transfer of funds out of the country in excess of the permissible amount allowed by the government of Britain. Defendants are to be held, without bail, to await trial."

"Your honor, our clients would be willing to plead guilty to a lesser charge of"

"Denied. You have reached no agreement with the Crown prosecution in this matter."

"But, your honor"

"Denied, sir! I've seen your brief, and know what you are going to suggest. You're going to try to tell me that you have proof that these techniques that doctors with Envoy training use are fake and a fraud. And I've seen the Crown prosecution evidence that suggests otherwise. Unless you can come up with a reasonable agreement with the prosecution, your motion is denied. Further, they will NOT be allowed bail as they are considered, individually and collectively, to be a flight risk. No, sir! They're staying right here and in jail, unless a jury finds them not guilty. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir. We will so inform our clients."

"Good. This hearing is adjourned."

"Well, Taylor?" asked Muriel.

"Stronger than I expected. The defense never bothered to approach the prosecution. That was the major mistake. They tried to ram it through the court, instead of coming to an agreement. Now, they've lost their chance. The Prosecution isn't going to let go of the negligent homicide charges, now. And that was the one they were most hopeful to have

reduced.”

“Ted froze their personal accounts, too,” Muriel said. “That was because of the willful financial ruin charge. He wants to claw back all those bonuses to pay those poor people back.”

“The one that's going to scare some people was the conspiracy with the hospitals charge,” Taylor said. “The hospitals know they're next. Between making the largest one in London a nursing home and that charge, they know their days are numbered. We're watching their financials and fund transfers.”

“Would it do them any good to simply plead guilty to all charges?” asked Muriel.

“Maybe some. But I doubt it. Basically, they won't see daylight again,” Taylor said. “The case against them is too solid. Even with reduced sentences, the minimum will have them in prison for the rest of their lives. And that's sad. They had the opportunity to avoid this. It's why we talked to them. But they thought they could bull it out – bluff their way past any charges. The fact that when the prosecution made the charges, he indicated that they had five full years to amend their ways killed any chance of that. They were notified. They were warned repeatedly. That's the willful part of all those charges. And that's what's stacked up against them.”

“I should say the case against them is solid. Alice helped your legal team. I think they're afraid of her, now. And she was backed up by research conducted by Fred and his team, and what she could get from Jeff's computer. I swear that brief was two inches thick,” Muriel said, grinning.

“No, they're not afraid of her. They're in AWE of her. They're Envoy trained, but never realized that someone could be such a stickler. They had the same resources she had, but she showed them how to use them in ways they'd never considered before,” Taylor said. “They want her to teach them. Come to think of it, does Betty have her methods as a dump?”

“Yep. Didn't you get it?” Muriel asked.

“I don't know,” he replied.

“Then let's go to my office and find out,” she said, and they translated out.

“Betty,” Muriel said, as they translated in, “did Taylor get Alice's methods?”

“No, I don't think so. In fact, I'm pretty sure not. She didn't give them to me until after he took his bar exam,” Betty said. “But that's easily remedied.” And she came in and gave it to him. Taylor looked speculatively for a couple of quiet minutes, then looked at Muriel.

“YOU'VE got this, don't you,” he said as a statement.

“Well, yes, sort of. But I got it as we went along, not as a single dump. Simply her

explaining what she needed when we came up against something,” Muriel said.

“This goes further than anything you've told me over the years about why you are the way you are. And why you insist on evidence. This is how to build the unbeatable case,” he said with awe. “This is how to convince ninety percent of the population of the necessity of an action, or how to convince Parliament of the need for change. This isn't just law, it's a framework for how to succeed!”

“Hmm. Maybe I need that dump, too, then,” Muriel said. And Betty gave it to her.

“I see what you mean. She's simplified it down by giving the what and why of each step along the way. She'd make a prosecutor that was the terror of the court, and a defense that was devastating,” Muriel said. “I'm going to have to thank her. I knew about half of this by rote. THIS . . . this gives the background on reasons for certain behaviors that I didn't understand and used clumsily. Alice,” she said and sent.

“Yes, ma'am. What can I do for you. Oh, hi, Taylor. Oh You got my dump,” Alice finally ran down.

“We both did. Have you given this to my legal team, yet?” Taylor asked.

“Nope. Why? Do they want it?” Alice asked.

“They don't know it yet, but they do,” Taylor said. “They're studying this brief of yours and trying to figure out what you did and how you did it.”

“Ah. OK, I'll go up and give it to them. Be back in a couple of minutes,” Alice said. And she was. “There we go. All fix.”

“Alice, what state did you leave them in?” asked Taylor, laughing.

“Oh, they're all right. Saul's crew is with them. They should come out of it in an hour or so,” she said, primly, and Taylor laughed. “Muriel, why'd YOU get it?”

“Because too much of what you do I was doing by rote, without really understanding it,” Muriel said. “Now I've got the framework to be able to understand what you did and why. And Taylor pointed out that it's effective in other areas, too, like Parliament and public speaking.”

“Really? I hadn't considered those. Do you suppose I should run for Parliament?” she asked. “Seriously, a lot of this was gleaned from Melanie and Henry, and what constitutes evidence, how to handle it, and how to make connections. And I've asked some judges what they looked for in requests for warrants, and what they looked for in evidence. Most of it is to use common sense, instead of wishful thinking.”

“What do you think will happen with this trial,” Muriel asked.

"They'll be convicted," Alice said, immediately. "They broke the law, and did it for their own gain. We've got the evidence. Emails, financial statements, stuff like that. And that mass of information we got from the raid showed even more. The collusion between the insurance companies, and that between companies and the medical licensing board. They were getting a piece of it, too. All under the table. And, because it's never about one place or one thing, we checked their financials, too. Yep. You guessed it. We've got a trail of illicit money that's longer than the trail behind a cow with diarrhea." And Muriel laughed. "Stinks, too," Alice added. And that set Taylor off again. "I have to wonder if they REALLY thought they couldn't get caught."

"Muriel," Taylor finally said, "I never realized how serious the problem was, from your standpoint, until doctors just seemed to come out of the woodwork at the accident,"

"You want to know where they came from?" asked Mata. "Hospitals. They'd been working as nurses, orderlies, technicians, whatever they could. They'd be friendly with patients, shake hands with them, maybe pat them on the back and a hand linger. And suddenly, whatever the patient had wasn't so serious. Those were the off-duty ones."

"Oh, my gosh! We just freed them to actually practice openly," Taylor said.

"Yep. And they're willing to go to where-ever the patient is," Mata said. "That's obvious from the fact that THEY came to the accident scene, rather than wait for them to come to the hospitals."

"And no way to track them, and make sure they get paid for the work they did," Muriel said.

"Wanna bet? Each one of them had an Envoy by them, helping," Mata said. "Sometimes, all the Envoy did was to keep the patient distracted while the doctors worked. But the Envoys know who they are. In fact, they gave me the list of names, addresses, and such."

"We can find them?" Muriel said.

"Yep. We can find them, and give them their first paycheck for BEING doctors," Mata said.

"Now, that's GREAT news, Mata. But we need to set up a procedure with them so that they can get paid in the field," Taylor said. "They don't have a way to submit a bill from the street. Or even collect the information."

"I have an idea. It might take a little time, but I think I know how we can do it," Muriel said. "Let me talk with Ted and Jeff. I think, once Ted has control of the insurance companies, that we can just issue them cards – like credit cards. And issue the doctors something like a phone, but with a slot to allow them to swipe the card. Then just enter the code for the procedure, and the paperwork is taken care of in the insurance office, and a copy sent back to the doctor."

"I heard," Ted said, translating in.

"So did I," said Jeff. "Mata squealed. Good idea, and won't take long, as soon as Ted comes up with the card, and the coding for it."

"That shouldn't take long. You know," Ted said, "That'll allow doctors to do the same thing in their office. Think about it – neighborhood doctors."

"Yea," Muriel said. "That's exactly what I was thinking about. Fran handles a community like that. True, most of it is in the day. But the American Enclave operated twenty-four seven, and there's always visitors and guests that come down with something. I think it could work."

"She's got backup, though," Ted said. "Mark is always available."

"True. But two doctors in an area. Would that work?" asked Muriel. "Could they make enough to make it work?"

"Good question. I'm going to have to talk to some, and come up with a schedule of fees," Ted said. "Oh, gad. I'm going to have to learn this barbaric monetary system, too." And Taylor snickered. "Quiet, you. You're only a King."

"That's been tried on me, before," Taylor said. "THEN, it put me in my place. Not now. Here, I'm the same as you. Just another voice"

"Crying in the wilderness," piped up Muriel. "Prepare me my bottle, please." And she snickered.

"Oh, good grief," said Ted. "Now it's religious puns."

"Hey, they had to be good for something. As literature, they're third rate. As history, they don't rate. And as legend they're predictable," Muriel said. "Might as well make some use of them."

"OK, Jeff and I need to get going and see what we can come up with. Oh, before I forget. Taylor, is there any problem with my just combining the insurance companies into one?" asked Ted.

"Not with me, there isn't. As long as you can cover what's positive in the contracts," Taylor said.

"Easily. If it happens, it's covered," Ted said. "No 'gotchas'. Sick? Injured? Falling down drunk? Pregnant? We'll cure anything."

"WAIT A MINUTE!" Muriel said. "THAT'S how to make it equitable to the doctors. Fran doesn't take any money because she figures that she gets enough with her salary for being

an Ambassador. How about the insurance company HIRING the doctors. It still means the cards and reader, but it simplifies their making enough to live on.”

“Now, that's an idea. Actually, that's a GOOD idea, if they'll go for it. Taylor? Any objections to a nationalized medicine?” asked Ted.

“You forget, we invented it. Yea, they MIGHT go for it. And it solves the problem of more than one doctor in an area, and the ability to cover for each other,” Taylor said.

“OK, I just passed it back to the Envoys that helped the doctors,” Mata said. “They're going to go knock on doors and ask them what they think. I know it's not a valid poll, but it would at least give us an idea.”

“Thanks, Mata,” Ted said. “That'll be a great help.”

Chapter 38

“Hi, my name is . . .”
(Monday afternoon)

At a tenement building, on the third floor, an Envoy translates in and knocks on a door. After waiting for about a minute, footsteps finally approach, and the door opens as far as a chain will allow. An eye appears in the small space provided, and a voice says, “Yes?”

“Hello. My name is Herb. I don't know if you remember me, but I was the one that helped you at the accident scene,” the Envoy said.

“So?”

“The insurance companies and medical licensing board . . .” And Herb was cut off.

“If you're here to arrest me then you can just talk to my lawyer,” the voice said.

“No ma'am. Nothing like that. I'm here to offer you a job,” Herb said.

“A job?”

“Yes, ma'am. As I was saying, the insurance companies and medical licensing board have been shut down for violation of the law, and other charges. The companies have been taken over by Home, and Home is offering you the opportunity to actually use your abilities,” Herb said.

“Wait a minute. You're an Envoy. I remember now. I wondered why you didn't just heal the boy, yourself,” she said.

“Yes, ma'am. But I didn't have the medical training to do it. You did, and did a great job. What you needed was someone to distract the patient while you worked, and help relieve pain,” he said.

“Wait a minute,” she said, and the door closed. There was the sound of the chain being removed, and then the door opened fully. “You might as well come in and tell me all about it.”

“Thank you, ma'am. This morning, Muriel, the Leader of Home, Taylor, your King, Muriel's lawyer, Ted, Ambassador to America, and Jeff, Ambassador in charge of computer and auto manufacturing got together and discussed what to do with the insurance companies, and how to get doctors trained in medical techniques working,” Herb said. “It was suggested that the insurance companies be combined into one, and that Home run it. That would cure a lot of unpleasantness concerning who was allowed to practice medicine, and what benefits patients had. Near the end of the discussion, while trying to figure out how to pay doctors, they came up with the idea of simply hiring them at a good salary. That way, they could be

covered, regardless of how much or how little they worked. Also, they'd be able to be paid for work they did outside the office. Jeff is coming up with a card reader. Customers would carry the cards, which would indicate the benefits they would receive, and the doctor would simply swipe the card in the reader, and tell it what the condition was that they took care of."

"I see holes in this, big enough to drive a lorry through," the woman said.

"Then blame me for not knowing more. But if you ask questions, maybe we can get some answers for you," Herb said. "I'll admit that, from what I understand, they're still working out some of the details. But I don't think either you or the insurance company customers would be hurt by any of this."

"All right. To start with, who would be hiring me, and to do what?"

"Oh, sorry. The insurance company would hire you. And the way Fran, Muriel's friend, has it set up, she has an office, but she more often goes to where the patient is and provides care on the spot. I believe they're thinking of something like that," Herb said.

"And the insurance company tells me that such-and-such procedure wasn't authorized, even though it was needed?" she said.

"No ma'am. I don't believe that Muriel would stand for that. But let me ask," Herb said. ::Mata, do you know if . . . ::

::I heard,:: Muriel said. ::Warn her that I'm coming in.::

"Ma'am, Muriel would like to talk to you, directly, if you don't mind. She'll be here in a second," Herb said, and a bell rang. Muriel translated in.

"Hi," she said. "First the formalities," she added, and pulled out her Home passport and put it in front of the woman. "Now, Ted and I have been talking, and we agree that there will only be one policy with the insurance company. If a customer is sick or injured, they get treated. Period. No 'gotchas', no denied claims. And you get paid, no matter how much or how little you work. Oh, we set up the office for you, too, so that you aren't out of pocket for that."

The woman looked at Muriel, sceptically, then opened the passport and read it, carefully. "You're really her. I've got someone more powerful than the King standing in my living room."

"Yep. Ma'am, we want this to work. We're not out to make money, we want to help people. Fran, a friend of mine, worked out how to cover an entire Enclave with just a small office, and her hopping all over the grounds to help people. She's also been in and out of Hospitals in America, whenever an emergency happened in surgery," Muriel said. "And she started doing this when she was twelve. Sometimes it means loss of sleep. But mostly, it means that people are cared for. Fran is salaried as an Ambassador, so she doesn't charge for the work she does. And that's what prompted us to think about putting doctors on salary."

The difference between this and 'nationalized medicine' is that there's no one looking over your shoulder, telling you what you can and can't do. If it's needed, you do it. The only reason for you sending the information to us is to provide you with the records of who you saw, when, and for what. We keep a copy for our records, and you get a copy for your office."

"Well, that just killed another question. Two, actually. I suppose I'd have to find staff for the office, though," she said, reflectively.

"Not necessarily, if you don't mind Envoys as staff," Muriel said. "They can take the medical training. In fact, it was an Envoy that came up with it, originally. Fran was the first human to take the course. And all her staff are Envoys. Oh, one important part of all this. The medical board was being . . . um . . . influenced by the insurance companies. They've been fired. They're also up on criminal charges, along with the heads of the insurance companies. Taylor is putting together a new licensing board, made up of doctors that have both the human style training and the Envoy style training. The law allowing Envoy medical training in Britain has been on the books for five years. It's been ignored by the medical board and insurance companies, because they couldn't make lots of money off it. Taylor warned them, and they chose to believe that the techniques were fake. Even after it was proven to them that they weren't. So, no, you don't have to worry about being arrested for something that was approved five years ago."

"You call him Taylor."

"Well, he is my consort," Muriel said, smiling. "And, as he kids me about, I out-rank him." The woman snorted.

"So, I didn't break the law by helping those people."

"Nope. You did what needed to be done, and helped us clean up a mess," Muriel said.

"You don't believe in beating around the bush, do you?" the woman said.

"Nope. Oh, I know, this is still kinda rough," Muriel said. "We're still feeling it out, ourselves, dotting 'tees' and crossing 'ayes'. But that's OUR problem, not yours."

"You do this often?"

"Well, this is the first medical situation I've been involved in," Muriel said. "But we set up the Envoy Enclave Enterprises when I was twelve, because of a bunch of businesses that were causing problems in America. It's grown. That's who would be in charge of the insurance company, and oversee it. Oh, yea. We're combining the companies. Unlike the car companies in America that were competing on styles and add-ons, the insurance companies were actually providing the same poor quality service to everyone. So, we combine them and provide better service, and no one is hurt except the ones that behaved in a criminal manner."

"What if someone doesn't have insurance?"

"Right now, Ted and I don't see that as a problem. Especially from your standpoint. They need help, you help them. You get paid, anyway, because you're on salary," Muriel said. "From our side, you let us know who the person is, and what you did. That keeps the records straight. If you can't get a good identification on a person, just give us an image. We'll find them. No, nothing like that," she added. "Not a criminal activity. Just adding it to the record, in case they need to be seen by someone else, you'd have an idea of what was done, and whether this is a recurring problem that needs to be dealt with differently. However, everyone should have a card. If they can't afford the insurance, then the government picks up the tab."

"You can speak for the government?"

"Nope. But I can relay what Taylor has already said to me," Muriel said. "The scale for the premiums would be dependent on what a person makes – I mean REALLY makes, and allowing for necessary expenses and such. There are a lot of people that can't afford insurance, that are covered under the government plan, already. They're not going to be hurt because they can't afford this."

The woman indicated the passport on the coffee table, and Muriel pulled it out of a 'no pocket' to retrieve it. THAT caused the woman's eyebrows to raise. "Can I think about it?"

"Of course," Muriel said, and looked at Herb for a moment, then handed the woman a CD. "This is a record of all that we've discussed. Just pop it in a computer, and you'll be able to pick it apart and see what other questions you have. Come by my office, and I'll be happy to discuss anything else that you think of."

"Your office. INSIDE the Palace?"

"Oh, shoot. Yes. Here," Muriel said, handing her a card. "Show that to the guard at the gate, and you'll be brought right in. I'm in and out, but there's always someone there that can make you comfortable until I return. And no, it's not an inconvenience. I've run an open office since I was first trained. I see no sense in changing, now." The woman sat back and looked at her.

"You're young."

"I used to be younger. I was twelve when I was told that I was the Leader of Home. I never knew. I'm not elected, or anything. I simply did what I thought was necessary, and the Envoys followed me. Suddenly, someone told me that I was actually their leader. To me, that just means that I'm going in the direction I think is right, and everybody else is chasing me. Some of them because they like where I'm going. And others because they want to kill me. Hasn't worked. I'm not dead, yet. I've told off American Presidents, Taylor's grandmother, the Russian President, the President of Taiwan, the President of Iran. Just about everyone, at one time or another, that thought that they could get the best of me or control me."

"And now His Majesty."

"Him? He doesn't need telling off. Now. Oh, he did, before he became King. I made him grow up. It infuriated him. I wouldn't have anything to do with him until he did." That caused the woman to smile, and her eyes twinkle. "But now?" Muriel said. "We talk. We discuss problems that affect his people and mine. He actually has some good ideas, and has taken steps to initiate them. He doesn't think he knows everything. Neither do I. We have lots of discussions, and often with a lot of people that you wouldn't expect us to discuss things with. For example, Herb ended up being our test case. As a result, other Envoys will know the answers that we've come up with, here, because you've been so helpful in asking them."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. You HAVE helped us. You're posing questions that we hadn't fully thought out, because we haven't been on that side of the situation," Muriel said. "But I'm in contact with Taylor and Ted, and we've been answering them on the fly."

"OK, I can think of another question. I know that there's about five others that are in the area. Not close, but in the area. So, who loses out?"

"Nobody," Muriel said. "Get together with them and work out coverage. By that, I mean if you are on vacation, or even just sleeping, who covers for you. Things like that and what area you each cover. Your salary isn't dependent on how many patients look to you. It's dependent on the fact that you're a doctor. So, even if you never pick up a following, but just run emergencies, you're still paid the same."

"You're not kidding, are you. I begin to see why you want the doctors salaried," she said. "And why you want a centralized record keeping. If someone up North sees 'Joe Blow' because of an accident, and two years later he sees me because of a hang-nail, or something, I know, just by swiping the card. You're personalizing this! You're making the patient important."

"Good way of looking at it. Yes. The patient is important. So is the doctor. But when a patient needs help, he or she is actually more important than the doctor," Muriel said.

"GOOD! I've seen too much of doctors in the hospital thinking they were more important than the patient," the woman said. "I was acting as a nurse, there, and there's too many times when the doctor just plain got it wrong. A couple of times, what one of them did would actually have killed the patient. And I had to correct it, and hide the fact that I did."

"They'll be weeded out," Muriel said. "For one thing, people are going to want an Envoy trained doctor more and more, as time goes by. And that will push out a lot of human style doctors. They, by the way, are NOT being salaried by Home. And Taylor understands why. To get the training and be able to use it, a person has to be a Citizen of Home – a fully trained human in the basics of Envoy training that's also had the medical courses. That training puts constraints on you. You HAVE to be honest with yourself to stay in balance. Regular doctors have no such constraints."

"That's what you do, isn't it. You find answers to questions."

“More like find answers to problems, but yes, that's what I do,” Muriel said. “The title is 'troubleshooter'. And it's what I've been doing since I was twelve, so I've got some experience at doing it. The problems don't have to be big. They just have to be there.”

“Well . . . I really do have to think about it. No offense, but I feel that you ran right over the top of me. I need to figure out if I want to start acting as a doctor, now,” the woman said.

“Then let me give you an updated record of this meeting, so you can make reasonable and informed decisions. Even if those decisions are simply what other questions to ask,” Muriel said, taking back the record she'd given the woman, and providing a new one. “And DO stop by. No matter what your decision is. You've been very helpful to us, and we appreciate it. Herb, let's get out of here, and let this nice woman think,” Muriel added, and they translated out.

Chapter 39

A Case of the Jitters

(Tuesday morning)

"Excuse me," the woman said. "I was told to give this to the guard, and he'd take me to Muriel's office."

"Clarence," the guard called out. "Here's your chance. Young lady to see the Ambassador. You said you wanted to see her office."

"OH! Thanks, Tom. Yes, ma'am. Right this way," Clarence said, as Tom opened the gate. "We're always acting as reception for Muriel. Not that we deny anyone access to her, of course. But after all, this IS the Palace, and there's got to be SOME sort of control. You see that gold emblem, over there? That's where we're going. You're a doctor, then."

"I . . . how did you know?" the woman asked.

"Oh, some of us are sensitive to what training people have. No, it isn't like reading minds, or anything," Clarence said. "More like a nudge that tells us what training a person has. Now Muriel, HER we can't read. It isn't because she's blocking us. But, well you'll see when you see her office. All I can tell with her is that she ISN'T a doctor. Or a couple of other things. She just kids that she has people for that. Here we go. Mind the door," which immediately Whooshed open. The woman never batted an eye, but just kept going.

"Hi, Mata. Someone to see Muriel," Clarence said. Mata looked up and smiled.

"Muriel, I think you're right. We need to put a cannon out there. The door just isn't doing it, anymore," Mata said. And a laugh came from the woman's left.

"You came. Good. Come on in. Tea? Milk, soda, coffee, water? Sit. Oh, the comment about the door? Usually, it claims an admission fee for first timers by making them pause. It startles people. We've had a few, though, that just wouldn't startle. You're one of them," Muriel said, guiding the woman into the casual area.

The woman stopped, and stared at the wall by Muriel's desk. "Oh, my! NOW I understand what the guard meant. No wonder he can't read what discipline you have. ALL of THOSE?"

"Well, it's mostly a case of my needing to know something, so I got another one," Muriel said. "It isn't like I actually practice any of the disciplines. But it helps to know about them in some of my dealings. For instance, I'm not a lawyer, but I have the federal laws for America, as well as the British laws. Keeps me from getting into TOO much trouble," Muriel said. "So, tea?" she asked again, producing a mug with the Home logo on it, and setting it in front of the woman. She finally looked down at the mug.

"Where'd this come from?" she asked.

"Oh, I made it. I won't do complicated meals. Partly because I'm not practiced at it, and partly because it would break Chuck's heart. If he had one. I take it that you had time to go through the record of our meeting, and come up with questions or decisions," Muriel said.

"Who made this place?" the woman asked.

"A friend of mine is a designer. Cars, buildings, building interiors, clothes, whatever. She came over from America, on day, and put this in place of a salle d'armes. She gave the idea of how the room was to be arranged to her Envoys, then concentrated on the walls. She was done in . . . oh . . . about fifteen minutes, I guess. Her consort is the one I told you about, that designs cars and does programming. They have a place in the American Enclave called the Design Studio. They're both just designing people," Muriel said.

"This . . . in fifteen minutes. And you can make mugs of tea," she said. And took a sip. And just the way I like it. How?"

"It all starts with power. Power turned into shields, and then into solids . . . well, liquids, in the case of the tea. And no, I didn't know how you liked it. I just told the shield for the tea to become the way you like it. The tea found out. Probably by asking your soul to supply the image," Muriel said. "Anyone with the training can do it."

"Anyone with"

"I got it, Muriel," Betty said. "Now, just let this pass through to your soul. I know you're connected enough to do that. These are add-ons that we've come up with, over the years. They are generalized use things that people have found helpful. You can pretty much make anything you want for daily living. Just a second . . . there. You should be good to go, now."

"I don't believe this!" the woman said. "I never realized just how far the training went."

"Oh, it goes much further than that, believe me. This, though, can help you to do some of the startling things that I do. They're fun. One of them is something that my parents came up with. Cleaning dishes without water. Their Envoy squad found out about it, and wouldn't let them do dishes anymore. They were having too much fun doing it, themselves," Muriel giggled.

"You're YOUNG!"

"Well, that happens to everybody, at some time in their life. Usually, near the beginning," Muriel quipped. "Now, I don't even know your name."

"Oh, it's Aretha. My mother liked the sound of it. Aretha Hopkins," she said.

"Muriel, do you have the . . . oops. Sorry," Taylor said as he came in. "I didn't realize you were busy."

"This is Aretha Hopkins. She's a doctor, and she's the one I went flying out of here, for, yesterday," Muriel said.

"Hi, Aretha. Now, dear, do you have the . . . what's the matter, Aretha?" he asked.

"Y-Y-Y-Your HIM?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, yes, I'm Taylor. Dear, do you have the record on the insurance companies? I thought I saw something in there, but now I can't find it," Taylor said.

"Hold on. Aretha, would you mind? I don't think this will take long. I think I know what he wants," Muriel said.

"N-N-No. D-Do you want me to leave?" Aretha asked.

"Oh, no. That's not necessary. Just relax. This will just be a minute," Muriel said, and put the record up on the screen. "That's what you wanted, isn't it? And the connection is over here," she added to Taylor.

"Got it! And I sent it to Ralph. He's going to look into the link between that and the universities, and the banks. This is getting deep," Taylor said. "Thanks. Nice meeting you, Aretha." And he translated out.

"Aretha? Are you OK?" asked Muriel.

"That was the King?"

"Of course. He and I are in and out of each other's offices all the time," Muriel said. "No big thing."

"But . . . he seemed so casual!" Aretha said, still showing signs of shell-shock.

"Of course. He's only formal when he needs to be," Muriel said. "I'm afraid I corrupted him. Now he jokes about the fact that, where-ever I am, he's out-ranked. Even in his own office."

"What HAVE I fallen into?"

"Oh, nothing abnormal," Muriel said. "It's like this all the time in here. I'm a relaxed, easy-going person, and run the office that way."

"Actually," Mata piped up, "I run the office. She just sits there and looks important." And Aretha started laughing.

"And harasses me," Muriel added. "Don't mind her. She's just my security chief. Now, as I was saying, there's a lot of cross-talk in here – discussions, suggestions, harassment and

such. But when somebody needs something, they very often need it now. I try to oblige them. First, because it gets them out of my way, and second, because they'd just hang around and pester me until I did deal with them, anyway. So, it LOOKS crazy to outsiders, but it's actually very organized. It's also how I manage to get things done in a hurry, when I need to. Taylor's become the same way from having to deal with the military. You DO know that he was Colonel of the Regiment of Home, don't you? Well, anyway, there's a certain level where you HAVE to operate quickly. We simply fell into the habit of using it."

"That's how you got things organized so quickly, at the accident, isn't it?"

"That, coupled with people knowing what was needed, and acting on it. Taylor called out the Regiment doctors. Mata called out extra Envoys from Home. And I started directing how to get people out of the bus, and cared for," Muriel said. "And the officer on the beat called in extra officers to hold back traffic when he saw what I was doing, relieving some of the Envoys to help the civilian doctors that Mata put a call out for. Make sense?"

"Yes. Yes it does. Is there a way I can learn to do that?" asked Aretha.

"Yep. But I'll trade you. I want to know why you didn't pause or get startled by the doors whooshing open," Muriel said, grinning.

"Oh, that. Hospital doors do the same thing. Probably for the same reason. If you have to get in or out in a hurry, like with an ER, then they'd BETTER be out of the way. They're just set up on a sensor," Aretha said.

"Betty"

"Already on it. One order of ancillary Ambassador, coming up," she said, grinning, herself. And dumped it into Aretha. "Now, you'll have to add to it, yourself, as to the people you can trust to do certain things in a given situation. But I think you can figure that out."

"OK. I'm in. I STILL don't know how you're going to do it. But obviously, you are," Aretha said. "And I'll help. I can weather the rough spots that are bound to show up in a new setup, like this. I might even be able to make some suggestions, as long as you allow for the fact that I'm seeing them from a somewhat narrow focus."

"Granted," Muriel said. "Can you stick around? There may be a discussion after lunch, and you can see how we've got it organized so far. It has to be after lunch, to allow for Ted and Jeff – and maybe Fran – to come in from America. It's a seven hour time difference between here and there. So, afternoon is morning for them."

"Yes. Let me make a phone call, and I'll be clear," she said, and pulled out a phone. After some discussion with someone on the other end, she finally hung up and looked disgusted.

"Problem?" asked Muriel.

"Only for them. They insisted that I be there, because I hadn't given them sufficient notice of my being absent," Aretha said. "They said that if I wasn't there, they'd fire me. Big loss. I don't know what you'll be paying me, but it's GOT to be at least what I was getting as a nurse."

"Oh, I'd say it was more. However, would you like me to talk to them, so you can keep your options open?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. We've been through this fight, before. It's just the hospital trying to play their controlling games," Aretha explained. "They know that if they actually did it, that every nurse in the hospital would walk out. We're not a union, as such. But we've gotten together and forced the issue before, when someone was sacked for calling in sick."

"Oh? What's their basic underlying personal problem?" asked Muriel.

"They're under the impression that they're so important, that if they fire us, we'll never work again in a hospital," Aretha said. "We set up a counter campaign. NO other nurses will work for them. Not even ones just out of school. It wasn't quite a black-listing. It was just an information packet on the hospital – that they were the lowest paying, highest casualty rate, dirtiest hospital in the city, and backed it up with evidence. That was four years ago. And I know it's working, because they HAVE lost nurses to other hospitals, and been unable to replace them. Then, two years ago, they came right out and said that they wouldn't hire doctors with Envoy training, because they were unproven. Some of us knew what that meant. People would die, unnecessarily. So, those of us with the Envoy doctor training agreed to stay on. We'd started as nurses, anyway. About forty percent of us are trained, and we've been getting others past the basics. So, if they do fire us, they won't have enough nurses to continue."

"OK," Muriel said. "When does your shift start?"

"Three o'clock," Aretha replied. "Well, two forty-five is check in. Why?"

"Because, by then we'll have a good idea of whether or not you want to stay employed by them," Muriel said. "If there's any question, stay with them. But, if we can get you hired by then, you'll have a paycheck that's backed by the banks that Home owns. More than you think. And you'll be able to draw on that account immediately. As long as you don't go hog wild, you'll end up with more at the end of the month than your wages from the hospital for the month. Especially, now that you know that you can make a lot of what you would have needed to buy over that period. And after that, it just gets better. I'm betting you will let us hire you. But we need to let YOU make the decision."

"Why are you bending over backwards for me?"

"Because if something went wrong because I pressured you, you'd be hurt," Muriel said. "And that would count against me in the balance. And the next time I went to Home, I'd get clobbered in the Judgment."

“OUCH! OK, enlightened self-interest, then. I can appreciate that,” Aretha said. “Can I tell others about this job offer?”

“Certainly,” Muriel quickly replied.

“Let me make a phone call, then,” she said, and pulled out her phone. A second later she said, “Tammy, don’t say anything aloud where the wrong people can hear you. I’ve just been offered a job to work for the insurance company that Home just set up. Or is setting up. They are hiring doctors that have the Envoy training in medicine. Let the others know, but nothing aloud. So, if a strange person comes to the door and looks like an Envoy, TALK to them. See you later. Maybe.” And she hung up.

“Why . . . ?”

“Why by phone and not just connect to her? Because if she glitched when she was busy – giving a stick or something – then it could have caused an accident. But by phone,” Aretha said, “if she were busy, she’d ignore it and call me back. We set that up a LONG time ago. And we did it because a mental connection DID cause an accident. Fortunately not serious, and I was able to cover and heal it immediately.”

“Aretha, who’s the leader of your group?” Muriel asked, suddenly serious.

“Well, as much as anybody is, I suppose it’s me,” she replied.

“O-K. That may just simplify things, then. May I see your passport?” asked Muriel. Aretha handed it to her. Muriel looked at it a second, then handed it back. “You’re hired. As of now. You’ll get your card drawn on the Home banks as soon as Ted becomes coherent. I’m passing the buck to you. YOU’RE going to do the hiring of the doctors.”

Aretha looked at her, quizzically, then looked at her passport. The front had the designation ‘Diplomat’ on it. And inside was her certification as being an Ambassador of Home. “You don’t fool around, do you.”

“And that’s in addition to any pay that you get from outside of home,” Muriel said. “Let’s go to lunch, and I’ll tell you what your responsibilities are.”

Chapter 40

Walkout (Tuesday afternoon)

"Dearly beloved," Ted pronounced in sonorous monotone, "we are gathered here in the sight of me and everybody"

"Get your tail over here and sit down, goof," Muriel said. "You'd make a very poor preacher."

"Would you have preferred, ' . . . lend me your ears. I come to bury insurance, not to praise it'?" he asked.

"I'd prefer you got over here and let us get to work," Muriel said. "First up, we have a new Ambassador, whose purpose is to see to it that doctors with Envoy training in medicine are not discriminated against. And she'll do the hiring for you, here in Britain. She needs an account and a card. So, get busy."

"Yes, sir – ma'am. Whatever you say sir – ma'am," Ted replied, grinning, and handed Aretha a card. "Bart had it all ready for me when I got up."

" 'Bout time that lazy clown did something," Mata replied. "I was about to throw him back and try again." Which had Aretha looking at her, funny. "I was corrupted by that grinning idiot over there. No, not Ted. The OTHER grinning idiot."

"Why, Mata! I'll have you know I'm NOT an idiot. I couldn't pass the test," Muriel said. Aretha just shook her head, slowly, then covered her face with her hand.

"Where's Taylor?" asked Ted. "I expected him to be here."

"In a bit. He's finishing something up. What about Jeff," asked Muriel.

"He's waiting for Fran. She had a kid manage to scrape up both hands, his face, and his knees. Jeff's distracting him. Don's at a school," Ted said.

"Ah. Well, we may have another hospital to turn into a nursing home. Right about now, they should be losing all their nurses for firing this young lady over here," Muriel said, indicating Aretha. "From what she tells me, no great loss."

"Muriel! Screen!" Mata suddenly said.

. . . in an unprecedented move, the nurses just packed up and left. The next shift was just coming on, and they didn't even bother to punch in. They simply turned around and walked out. The hospital is left with no one to care for the patients, and are having to transfer them to other facilities. The administrator has threatened to have them brought up on

criminal charges. Again, the head nurse for the ER had called in that she wouldn't be able to come in, today, due to an important meeting. Administration ordered her to come in or lose her job. When she didn't show at two forty-five, they fired her. The nurses on duty calmly went to their lockers, cleaned them out, and left. This is NOT a strike. One of the nurses talked with our reporter on the scene. The administration has been high handed in their handling of employees for at least the past four years. Their rating is the lowest in the city, and they do whatever they can to make things difficult for the nurses and other employees, including the lack of even cost of living raises. These nurses have no intention of coming back to this facility. Another nurse informed our reporter that, in fact, about thirty percent of the nurses are actually doctors trained in Envoy techniques, and that's the ONLY reason the hospital fatalities didn't increase. We've been trying to find the nurse that was fired, but so far have been unsuccessful.

"Kill it, Mata. We've heard enough," Taylor said, coming into the room. "I take it that this is the nurse they fired?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Aretha said. Taylor shook his head.

"First," he said, "I'm outranked by everybody in this office. And that includes you, since you've just been made an Ambassador for Home. Second, Muriel runs a casual office. In here, I'm just Taylor," he added, and smiled. "Outside, if you feel it's something formal, then fine. But we're here to discuss what to do now. First, with the insurance companies – or I guess it's just company, now. And second, what to do with the hospital that was just informally closed. And I think they're doing what they can to transfer patients to other facilities, so that can wait. Where's Jeff?"

"Behind you. We'd already be sitting, but you're blocking the way," Jeff said, and Fran giggled. "Welcome to the madhouse, Aretha. We aren't kept in. We keep everyone else out." Fran simply went and sat by Aretha.

"OK, Ted, I guess you're up first," Muriel said.

"The companies are consolidated. Thanks, Taylor, for giving that a hand," Ted said. "Their accounts are frozen pending the trials, but that's not a problem for us. The new contract, if you can call it that, simply says 'if you're sick or injured and see a doctor trained in Envoy techniques, you're covered. Period. Any regular doctor is being evaluated on two things. First, the procedure he performs, and second, his ability to accomplish his ends. AND, the rates are lower than what they were getting. Those were just outrageous."

"You're forcing the old style doctors out, then," Taylor said.

"Yep. They can take the training and use the Envoy techniques, or they can go to work at the local fast food restaurant. IF they'll take them. Sorry, Taylor, if that seems harsh. But they've been killing the people, slowly, all these years, and are part of the reason that some of them are in financial ruin. They were part of the problem. I'm the solution," Ted said.

"OK, how are you doing on the records of the companies?" asked Muriel.

“Good. Ralph is working with my analysis team and the American office of Triple E. He should have everything that we have. And he's come up with some zingers that allowed us to seize other accounts,” Ted said. “Apparently, something that Taylor suggested opened up a whole can of worms. The pharmaceutical companies. They had a major hand in controlling the insurance companies. The only reason they haven't contacted US yet is because they don't know we exist. I expect that as soon as we start issuing cards to people, that will change. And that's when the criminal charges will be suggested. Alice is already aware, and the reason she isn't here is because she's going over the records, too, to see what charges can be brought, or what further information is needed for evidence.”

“You're expecting to hand out cards, soon?” asked Muriel.

“Wednesday, at the latest. A group in Home is making them up, now. But there's a LOT of people that will get them. That's why it's taking that long,” Ted said. “It'll probably be Envoys that have to pass them out, too, since there's just too many people to have them line up at a door to get them. That's tomorrow's problem. They'll let me know what they can do, and how.”

“OK, Jeff, what's the status on the reader?” asked Muriel.

“Done. Fortunately, we don't need as many readers as we do cards. The prototype is in the hands of the manufacturer, now,” Jeff said. “They should be done about the same time the cards are done.”

“I'm next,” Fran said. “If you're hiring the Envoy trained doctors directly, then the idea of communities being covered the way I cover Enclave should work. That's if the doctors don't mind getting out and doing.”

“Can I interrupt?” asked Aretha. Then went ahead and interrupted. “Some of those doctors are too old to get around, easily. I know more than just the ones that were nurses in the hospital. Is there a way to put them in an office and leave them there, and have the younger ones do the running around?”

“Why don't you tell us,” Muriel said. “Do you know the doctor versus population density for them?”

“Not right off hand. I know that some of the nurses would be willing to move to other areas. The only reason they stayed where they were was to be as close as they could be to the hospital,” Aretha said. “Well, that's changed. Anyway, what you were talking about, before, of having an office, but covering an area, what I was thinking of was putting the older ones in the office and leaving them there. But having a younger doctor there, too, that could go out on emergencies and such. Not everybody is sick or injured enough to call out a doctor. Having an office for them to go to makes sense. It's only the serious stuff that needs a doctor on the scene.”

“I'll second that,” Fran said. “I see what she's saying. However, tell your friends that

they don't have to move – distance is no barrier. They can translate. If it's into a crowded area, then ring a bell, and translate into the air. Force the crowd open with a shield.”

“Yea, we can do that,” Aretha said. “I see what you mean. OK, I'll get with them on that. What do we use as offices?”

“Storefronts,” Muriel said. “We buy them and convert them into a stock office. After you've been in for a while, if you want to change the decor, we can see about it. But at first we'd have to get in and get done as quickly as possible. Taylor, did you come up with a list of possible places?”

“Yes,” Taylor said. “They're not all optimum, but they're all close to it. I've had legal getting with the owners and either buy them, outright, or taking a hundred year lease on them. In the case of the latter, THEY have to pay the taxes, and in advance. Obviously, they're more interested in our buying them, then. I'm doing this out of MY funds, so, for a while, you'll have to support me in the manner to which I'd like to become accustomed.” That brought chuckles from the assembled people.

“OK, what else?” asked Muriel.

“Who's actually running this?” asked Taylor. “Home or Britain?”

“Good question,” Ted said. “Right off hand, I think you're outsourcing it,” he said, grinning. “We're doing it, but under your direction and rules and regulations. All right?”

“Sounds good. So, you aren't going to have a conniption fit if we put our name on it?” Taylor asked.

“Nope. We're not making any money off of it,” Ted said. “You won't either, you know. You'll be luck to break even.”

“You do know that this is paid for out of taxes, don't you?” asked Taylor.

“I got that idea. Which is why you can expect that you MIGHT break even, once the old style doctors are totally out,” Ted said.

“How is this being funded,” asked Muriel.

“We're covering it, until the financials can be straightened out, here in Britain,” Ted said. “I don't think that'll be too long. Taylor, I'm going to ask a rather sensitive question.”

“Two weeks. You're asking when the old Parliament members will go to trial. Two weeks. They've had enough time to try to defend themselves. And the judge has been sandbagging it. He was replaced,” Taylor said. “When I caught on to what he was doing, I suggested that he retire. He took the hint. The new judge for the case called the lawyers in and told them that there'd better be a trial, soon, or the LAWYERS were going to be charged. Meanwhile, the politicians are sitting in jail without bail. Their accounts are frozen, and

families have moved back in with grandparents, and such, except for a few cases where the wives worked. And on another note," Taylor added, "More women are running for Parliament than ever before. We may break the 'good old boy' attitude, yet."

"Well, that's a start. Any chance your country can come up with a decent suit?" asked Ted.

"Nope. Despite the fact that such things are possible, they still wear the same straight jackets," Taylor replied. "We even tried telling them that they were literally cutting off blood supply to their brains. They simply laughed and tightened their ties."

"Well . . . is there anything else?" asked Muriel.

"Not right at the moment," Ted said. "You'll get interim reports as we get them, of course. But, now we wait."

"OK. Well, I think we got somewhere," Muriel said. "Now all we need are the doctors."

"Maybe I can help with that. Is there someplace where I can hold a meeting of about a hundred people?" asked Aretha.

"Yep. The Training Room at 'The Welcoming One'. They'll even set up and provide refreshments for you," Muriel said.

"Where's that at?"

"That's that new, white building that was all over the news a while back. Including a minor riot," Muriel said, grinning.

"Ouch. I remember that place. High end. What'll that set the group back," asked Aretha.

"Nothing. One of the perks of being trained and an Ambassador," Muriel said. "We own it."

"WHAT! You've got to be making a fortune off that place," Aretha said.

"Nope. It was built to house people trying to get their lives back in order. To literally get families off the street. Oh, and to train people in the basics," Muriel said. "A friend of mine designed it, brought her squad and a bunch from Home to build it. It's fully staffed by Envoys. All it cost us was the land and taxes. There's nothing else going on right now. Want to see about getting it set up?"

"You're not kidding, are you," Aretha said. "No, you wouldn't kid about it. But you're hiding something."

"So, we go and you'll find out what I'm hiding," Muriel said with a grin. And seconds

later, they were in the parking lot, facing the building.

“GAD! It looks like a woman with wings,” Aretha said.

“Yep. Welcoming those that need help,” Muriel said. “Let's go in, and tell the manager we need the training room.” And, once again, the sculpture stopped someone at the door.

“That's . . . that's you, isn't it?” asked Aretha.

“Yep. It took nine images, a good computer, and about an hour and a half to create it,” Muriel said. “But it was worth it. THIS was what Carla was trying to portray with the building. I think she achieved it.”

“YOU made this?”

“Yea, I do sculpture, sometimes. Just a hobby,” Muriel said.

“So, how'd you get the wings to model from?” asked Aretha. And Muriel stepped away, turned, and grew some. Then glowed. Then the wings appeared.

“Ask your soul how it's done,” Muriel said, killing the glow and reducing her size. “They're real. And yes, I'm human. You can do it, too.”

“Oh, man. The crowd is NOT going to believe this,” Aretha said.

Chapter 41

Hiring Fair

(Tuesday afternoon, later)

“Relax. I'm here. I'll help,” Muriel said.

“I can't help it. I've never dealt with ALL of them at once,” Aretha said. “Will they be able to find the place?”

“You gave them a good image. They'll make it. Give them a chance to work their way up the tree of your organization,” Muriel said. “Even making mental contact, it takes some time to communicate.”

“OK. Here come the first of them. Do I look all right?”

“You look fine,” Muriel said. “Just greet them, and I'll show them to the training room.” And shortly, Aretha was busy greeting people. People that were stunned by the building, and blown away by the sculpture behind the reception desk. And Muriel was busy leading people to the training room, where Envoys took over helping them find chairs, and getting refreshments for them. And fifteen minutes later Aretha was standing in front of the crowd.

“Some of you know me. My name is Aretha Hopkins. I've been a nurse for a long time. But I'm actually a doctor trained in the Envoy techniques of medicine. And I'm here to offer you a job. ALL of you. The job is to BE doctors. The pay starts immediately, as do the full benefits. Offices will be set up for you. The catch is that many of you will actually be seeing your patients where-ever they happen to be. Some of you know what I mean, as you were there at the accident a few days ago. This is NOT a scam. This is an honest job offer. You'd be salaried by Home, through the insurance company they set up to replace the ones that just crashed on the stock market. And it's more than you're making now. As you know, the people standing by you are Envoys. They'll give you the applications to fill out, and help you with anything you don't understand. Now, just to make it official, I'd like to introduce the Leader of Home and Ambassador to earth, Muriel.”

“Hi. I'm Muriel,” she said, as she walked forward toward the crowd. “Most people call me Muriel. Some call me that awful girl that keeps pestering us. Others use language that I won't repeat in a mixed crowd,” which brought chuckles. “I'm offering you work. Work that you were trained to do and wanted to do. Work you were kept from by greedy people that wanted to keep the money train rolling. Guess what. It derailed. Now, to the important stuff. Why salaried? Because that way you'll make more in a year than human style doctors, and you'll make it regularly. And you know as well as I do that the medical profession has its ups and downs. You don't have to scrabble for patients. You'll be serving an area of the city, and if there are days when nobody's sick or injured, you still get paid the same. It doesn't matter if it's a cut finger on a kid or a major heart attack, you still get paid. And, for those of you that sign up, today, it starts from today. Even though we don't have offices for you yet. Even though it'll be a couple of days before we can get cards out to the public and readers out to

you, you get paid.”

“Now,” she went on, “we WILL be setting up offices for you. They’ll be rather plain, to begin with. They’ll be small, because you won’t have the volume of people coming in to you that human doctors have. There won’t be the the long recovery times, or the repeated return of patients for the same problems. And how do I know? Because a friend of mine has been doing this in the American Enclave for nine years. And her first major solo operation was to keep a man alive and fix his heart in my office. And he’s come back, but never because he had a heart attack. He comes back to see us simply because he likes us. Oh, you’ll have kids return for bumps and scrapes, or maybe a broken bone. But NOT because they’ve got some serious disease that needs repeated treatment. And, except for rare occasions, she covers the entire compound alone. There IS another doctor, there, and he covers for her when she HAS to be away. But normally, he simply concentrates on research. He was the Envoy that began the whole idea of using Envoy techniques to heal people. And, by the way,” she said, quietly, “The American Enclave is open all the time, and people come to see it at all hours of the day or night. So, in that sense, it mimics a small version of a city.”

“You will be doing more than just healing people, too. We know that there are areas of the city where people are living in poor conditions. Commissioner Smythe of the Metropolitan Police has resource squads out, now, trying to find these areas and get them cleaned up and fixed up. He’s not out after the little people – the residents of tenements and row houses. He’s out after the landlords that refuse to fix them up. He’s after the contractors that use substandard materials that create the dangerous conditions the people are living in. We also know that there’s spousal abuse and child abuse, and he’d like to have a talk with such people that cause it. Because talking to them may help find the reasons for it, and how to end it. We want to help people, not arrest them or control them. We want to make the lives of people better. And you can help, by letting us know what you see and hear. You’re not investigators. You’re not spies. You’re an early warning system for areas that need help.”

“Now, the reason for the cards and readers,” she went on. “We’re not checking up on you. We’re not checking up on your patients. But, we ARE looking for patterns. If we see a lot of bruises in an area, we know that there’s SOMETHING bothering the people. If we see a lot of illness of a particular type, we know that something is going around, and maybe we can stop it from going around. You’ve all been in medicine, and know what I mean. The cards and readers can help us to track such situations, and alert you or Commissioner Smythe to the possible problems without disclosing individual names. It also helps US to justify OUR job of providing care to the people of Britain.”

“One more thing,” she said, starting her conclusion, “I’ve put poor Aretha through a lot Yesterday and today, starting with sending an Envoy to talk to her, which ended up with her meeting some crazy girl that offered her the moon. Well actually, I offered her more than that. I asked her to take over finding out what you need, and how to get doctors in and organized to do the work. Hospitals will eventually be going away.”

“Well ONE of them sure did,” came the comment from the crowd.

“More than one,” Muriel said. “We had shut down another one, earlier, which was what had alerted us to a major problem – that you weren’t being allowed to practice. That’s what caused the insurance companies and medical licensing board to come under investigation for criminal activity. That first hospital has already been turned into a nursing home, and one office will be there. The second hospital will end up going the same way, even if we have to tear it down and rebuild it to clean it up. Yea, I heard about that place. Anyway, Aretha became a focus as a result of this whole mess, so I put her in as your spokesperson. Have a problem? Talk to her. She’d understand the medical aspects that I wouldn’t. And she knows most of you, so that makes it easier for both of you to deal with each other. If she can’t help, then I expect her to holler for me, and we’ll work something out. We do have resources to help solve problems. And our concern is the whole population of Britain. And now I’m going to go sit down, over here, while you people think and come up with either questions or decisions. And if you want to talk, I’ll be here.” And she walked over to a chair, and sat down.

“What do you think, Betty?”

“I think they’re all trained, and actually remember what to do,” her education squad leader said. “We may have some that need the same ‘booster shot’ that we gave Aretha. Should I work the crowd?”

“You can, if you want to. You’ve already spotted the ones that need it?” asked Muriel.

“Yep. While you were talking. OK, I’m gone. Be back in a few,” she said, and wandered over to the crowd seating.

“Mata, any problems?” asked Muriel.

“Nope. There may be two or three that won’t sign up right away. No, you didn’t miss anything. The problem is that they LIKE being nurses with an extra, rather than doctors,” Mata said.

“Hmm. They’d make good cover for offices, then,” Muriel said.

“Interesting thought. I’ll pass it past the Envoys attending them, and have them make the suggestion that they talk to you about it,” her security chief said. And, about that time, one of the crowd approached her.

“Miss? Ma’am, I was wondering”

“Go ahead. Here, grab a seat, and make yourself comfortable,” Muriel said, creating a chair next to her but facing toward her.

“Well, it really isn’t about what you’re offering,” the man said. “It was this building, and that statue in the foyer. Who did them?”

“Oh, the building was done by a friend of mine. She did the design and engineering, then bossed the crew that actually built the building. She did it based on images of past

events,” Muriel said.

“And the statue?” he asked.

“I’m afraid I’m guilty of that. When I saw the building Carla – the friend I told you about – made the comment that she wished she had something a bit clearer to show what the building was supposed to be. So, I took her and a bunch of others outside, and got nine images to use as a three dimensional model to create the sculpture from,” Muriel said.

“But . . . I mean, who was the model?” he asked.

“Yea, I was afraid that that’s what you wanted to know. OK, true confession time. It’s me. I took them out in the parking lot, where there’d be room, then went into full display. It’s something that both humans and Envoys can do. Then, I created the sculpture from the images. I can give you the process and procedure I go through in creating such sculptures. And yes, I’ve done others. If you’ve ever visited the British Enclave, you may have seen the one of Taylor riding a ‘ghost’ horse,” Muriel said.

“THAT was you, too? What about the one that’s called ‘Muriel and Muriel’,” he asked.

“Oh, that. That was just a student piece. The Envoy that taught me told me to start with something that I know. Well, I know me. So, when I was sixteen, I did that first one using me at twelve and me at sixteen,” she said.

“Is this how you want to be remembered? Welcoming? Looking forward and back?” he asked.

Muriel shrugged. “I’ll be remembered as I’m remembered. Some may get it right, some may get it wrong. Me? I won’t care how I’m remembered, because I won’t be here to care. I’m just a girl doing a job. A sometimes dirty job, but still just a job. Trying to eliminate bullies, and help those that have, for so long, not had any help,” Muriel said, quietly. “I’m an attack dog. I go after the bullies of society.”

“And who aims you?” he asked, persistently.

Muriel looked at him, looked deeper, and smiled. “I do. Society does. The people around me do, by asking questions that until recently couldn’t be asked. Ultimately, I’m the one that decides what to attack, and when. The most harmful ones at the time feel my bite. But, a part of making my decisions is the need to have two things. One is evidence to attack with. The second is something to replace what I’m attacking. We did it with governments by replacing them with people that could actually do the work without being paid off by companies. We did it with companies by crashing their stock, and taking them private. THEN making them profitable, and getting them to actually compete with each other, instead of using litigation as a way to stifle opponents. And now, we’re doing it by attacking the medical sector and replacing it with ways to actually heal people. I don’t dodge my responsibility for my actions, sir. And if you wish to discuss psychology, I can find you someone better qualified than I to talk to. Would you like that? He’s another friend of mine.”

“So, that's what you looked for,” he said, smiling. “Yes, I was a psychologist. I heard about the Envoy techniques in medicine, and wondered if they worked. I take it that your friend is also a psychologist?”

“Bobby is an inoffensive guy that likes to talk to people about their mental pain until they stop hurting, or find a way to heal their own pain,” Muriel said. “The only title he uses is 'Counselor'. But I know for fact that he's taken the psychology and psychiatry courses that humans take – which meant that he also took the human medical courses, but not the practical that went with them. He also took sociology and a bunch of others. He doesn't use Robert, because it's too formal. He doesn't use Bob, because that's what you do in an ocean. Just inoffensive Bobby, that likes to talk, and help people find their own solutions without trying to change them.”

“I'd like to meet him, sometime,” he said. “He sounds like fun.”

“Hold on.” ::Bobby,:: Muriel sent, ::am I disturbing anything?::

“You're disturbance enough, all by yourself, Muriel. Why should I mind a bit more?” he said, translating in. “OH, a psychologist. And he tangled with you and survived. You getting mellow in your old age?” he asked, grinning. The psychologist laughed.

“Nope. Just getting old in my old age,” Muriel grinned back at him. “This gentleman was interested in meeting you. I told him about your name and the reason why you kept the childish appellation. He said you sounded like fun. Try to leave him in one piece. He's had the training in Envoy medical techniques, and we need all the doctors we can get or train, over here.”

“So I heard. You still need to take out the pharmaceuticals. THEY'RE the ones with the money to try to fight you,” Bobby said, and took the man off to another area of the training room, and made seats for them. They looked like they were deep into it before they even sat down. And Bobby was obviously winning, since the man was laughing.

Muriel looked around at the rest of the crowd. Aretha was going from one to another, obviously looking for questions. Those would come, Muriel knew. Later. After people had had a chance to really see what the job was. THAT was the time for more questions. But by then they'd be hooked. It's also when the suggestions would start. New ways of doing things. Poor Mark. He'd be hard-pressed to keep up with the changes, at first. But this was where the real questions and suggestions came from. People. Amazing people with ingenuity and the will to succeed simply for the sake of succeeding by helping others.

“Aretha said something about having Envoys as staff,” a woman said, breaking her reverie.

“Yep. They'll serve two purposes,” Muriel said. “First, they'll be support doctors. YOU'LL be the lead. But they'll back you up by handling some of the load so you can concentrate on the most important aspects. That's how Fran worked, when she was twelve,

healing a man who had a heart attack. One Envoy doctor kept the blood circulating and oxygenated, one removed stents and strengthened blood vessels. And she worked on the man's heart. From what I understand, she pretty much had to rebuild it. But another purpose is that they'll help protect you. We're going through a period of change, and there are those that won't want the change to happen. They're there to protect you and your patients. They're also 'office staff', whatever that may mean. They'll also show you some tricks that we've come up with, over the years. And at the same time, you'll be showing THEM new things as you apply your education to the realities of human beings. And those will get passed back up the line as well as across to others."

"OH! I hadn't thought about that. So, we don't stop learning just because we've had the course," she said.

"Nope. You never stop learning. I have a wall full of diplomas in my office," Muriel said. "Each course represents something that I had to learn to tackle a new problem. And I get regular updates on a lot of them. Everything builds on what came before. You'll find it's the same thing with medicine. And you'll end up contributing back to the pool of knowledge."



Meet the Author

Craig A. Eddy

I'm 67, retired and proud of it. I live in a science fiction world. When I was 14, I wanted a computer that would do the things the room sized ones could do, but would fit in a briefcase. I was thinking small. What I ended up with a few years later was one that could do those things and fit in my shirt pocket. And it's just gotten better. I've been a CAD operator (18 1/2 years) and a number of other things in my life, and now I write fantasy novels for my own amusement using a computer with no paid software on it. All free. Even the operating system (Linux).

Currently writing Fantasy books that are available as PDF files under Creative Commons License.

Bragging rights:

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy a B.A. in BS